

The Transatlantic Bargain in Crisis: US-European Foreign Policy Analysis in 2025

Preface

This article examines a volatile and rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape where transatlantic relations are in unprecedented flux. Policies shift within weeks, and what appears stable today may be outdated tomorrow. NATO consultations, European economic disputes, and US domestic politics all change faster than analysis can keep pace. The purpose here is not to predict exact outcomes, but to capture the structural forces shaping them.

The most recent escalation underscores this volatility. In September 2025, Poland and Estonia invoked NATO's Article 4 after Russian drones crossed their airspace. The consultations highlighted both the alliance's formal solidarity and its fragile credibility: Eastern allies viewed the incident as existential, while Washington downplayed it as another burden. This divergence reflects the core theme of this analysis: a transatlantic bargain under strain, caught between US retrenchment and European fragmentation.^{[1][2][3]}

Introduction

Since 1949, the transatlantic alliance has underpinned Western security through an implicit bargain: the US provided nuclear deterrence and security guarantees while Europe aligned strategically and economically. This arrangement was never equal, but it was durable. Today, however, it is fraying at both ends.

The central puzzle emerges from conflicting trends: Is America entering a new age of isolationism, or merely reprioritizing toward Asia? Can Europe fill the gap left by US retrenchment, or will internal divisions prevent effective action? How does Russia exploit these cracks systematically? And what role do smaller theaters like the Balkans play in testing Western credibility?

This analysis addresses these questions through five interconnected perspectives: the American experience of retrenchment and conditional engagement; the European struggle between strategic autonomy and internal fragmentation; Russia's opportunistic exploitation of Western divisions; the Balkans as a bellwether of broader Western credibility; and Ukraine as the central test case where all dynamics converge.

The thesis advanced here is that the US is shifting toward **transactional retrenchment**—maintaining military capacity while reducing political commitment—while Europe pursues **uneven autonomy**—aspiring to independence but lacking the cohesion to achieve it. This creates a cycle of reciprocal weakness: American disengagement justifies European disunity, which reinforces American claims of Allied dependency. Russia exploits this cycle systematically, pressuring Ukraine and destabilizing the Balkans. Ultimately, Ukraine serves as the fulcrum on which transatlantic credibility rests.

Section I: The American Perspective – From Leadership to Conditional Engagement

From Global Guarantor to Transactional Partner

The Truman Doctrine of 1947 declared that the United States "must support free peoples resisting attempted subjugation." This ethos of global leadership and unconditional security guarantees defined American foreign policy for seven decades. NATO embodied this commitment through Article 5's promise of collective defense.

Trump's return to power represents a historic rupture with this continuity. Unlike previous administrations that pressed allies on burden-sharing while affirming NATO's strategic value, Trump openly questions Article 5 commitments and frames European allies as "parasites". His rhetoric reframes alliances not as strategic necessities but as financial burdens requiring constant renegotiation.^[4]

This shift manifests most clearly in the September 2025 Article 4 consultations. For Poland and Estonia, Russian drone incursions and airspace violations required urgent alliance solidarity. For Washington, these incidents were framed as evidence of European overdependence rather than collective threats. The difference is stark: Eastern Europe seeks reassurance through Article 4; the US treats such consultations as proof of Allied weakness.^{[1][2][5][3]}

Retrenchment Through Conditionality

American retrenchment in 2025 operates less through withdrawal than through conditionality. The June 2025 NATO Hague Summit commitment to spend 5% of GDP on defense by 2035 exemplifies this dynamic. While presented as an Allied consensus, this target was effectively a Trump ultimatum: maintain Article 5 credibility by "paying your share".^{[4][6]}

The 5% target represents an extraordinary increase from the longstanding 2% guideline. For most European allies, achieving 3.5% for core defense spending plus 1.5% for security-related investments will require fundamental budgetary restructuring. This burden-shifting allows the US to maintain alliance commitments formally while transferring actual responsibility to Europeans.^{[6][7][8]}

| Year | Invoked by | Reason | Outcome / Context |
|------|---|---|--|
| 2003 | Turkey | Iraq War concerns | Operation Display Deterrence |
| 2012 | Turkey | Shootdown of Turkish military jet by Syria; Syrian shelling Turkish cities | Operation Active Fence |
| 2014 | Latvia, Lithuania, Poland | Russian annexation of Crimea | Deployment of forces in Black Sea, aid to Ukraine, Enhanced Forward Presence |
| 2015 | Turkey | 2015 Suruç bombing by ISIS | Denunciation and reassessment of NATO assets in Turkey |
| 2020 | Turkey | Northwestern Syria offensive; Syrian and Russian airstrikes on Turkish troops | Augmentation of Turkish air defenses |
| 2022 | Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia | Russian invasion of Ukraine | Defensive buildup, matériel support to Ukraine, NATO Response Force activation |
| 2025 | Poland | Russian drone incursions | NATO Operation Eastern Sentry |
| 2025 | Estonia | Russian fighter jets violating airspace | NATO Operation Eastern Sentry |

Table 1: NATO Article 4 Activations Since 2001 demonstrates how rare these consultations have been historically, making the 2025 dual invocations by Poland and Estonia particularly significant as stress tests of alliance solidarity under new conditional arrangements.

Domestic Foundations of Isolationism

American public opinion provides the political foundation for this retrenchment. Despite headlines suggesting broad NATO support, deeper polling reveals concerning trends. While overall support remains at 74-76%, the partisan gap has reached historic proportions. Republican support has declined to just 59%—a 9-point drop from 2024 and the lowest level in Chicago Council polling since 1974.^{[9][10]}

More telling is American indifference to foreign policy priorities. NATO ranks well below domestic concerns like inflation, immigration, and partisan conflicts in voter attention. The September 2025 Article 4 consultations received minimal US media coverage, crowded out by domestic political drama. This silence matters: when voters are uninformed, isolationist policies face little resistance.^[11]

The Reagan Institute's 2025 survey offers a more optimistic reading, showing 71% support for using American military force to defend NATO allies if attacked. However, this abstract support may not translate into sustained political backing for specific interventions, particularly in complex scenarios involving hybrid warfare or gray-zone conflicts.^[11]

Erosion of Soft Power Infrastructure

Isolationist sentiment has been reinforced by systematic dismantling of America's soft power infrastructure. The Trump administration's cuts to USAID represent the most dramatic example. The Rescissions Act of 2025 withdrew approximately \$8 billion from USAID and related programs, with the agency effectively dissolved and absorbed into the State Department.^{[12][13]}

This represents more than budgetary austerity; it reflects ideological rejection of development assistance as a tool of influence. As Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared, USAID "viewed its constituency as the United Nations, multinational NGOs, and the broader global community—not the US taxpayers who funded its budget". The dissolution eliminates programs that historically provided American leverage in fragile states where Russia now competes for influence.^[12]

The cuts extend beyond development aid to include \$175 million for the West Bank and Gaza, \$150 million for Iraq, and \$800 million for emergency shelter and humanitarian assistance globally. These reductions occur precisely when Russia and China are expanding their own

influence operations in the Global South featuring programs like the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative which also extends into Europe and has strong implications in the Balkans.^[14]

Strategic Implications of Transactional Retrenchment

The American perspective in 2025 is defined by what can be termed **transactional retrenchment**: maintaining military capabilities while reducing political commitment. Unlike isolationism of the 1930s, this approach does not withdraw from international engagement entirely. Instead, it reframes engagement as conditional and reciprocal.

This has several strategic implications. First, it undermines deterrence by making adversaries doubt American resolve. Russia's calculation to escalate drone incursions into NATO territory likely reflects assessments that Washington will downplay rather than escalate such provocations.^{[11][15]}

Second, it encourages European strategic autonomy not through partnership but through abandonment anxiety. European defense spending increases represent responses to American unreliability rather than collaborative planning.^{[7][8]}

Third, it weakens American influence in multilateral institutions precisely when competitors like Russia and China are working to reshape global governance structures.^[16]

The paradox of transactional retrenchment is that by demanding greater burden-sharing, it may ultimately reduce American leverage over the outcomes that burden-sharing is meant to achieve.

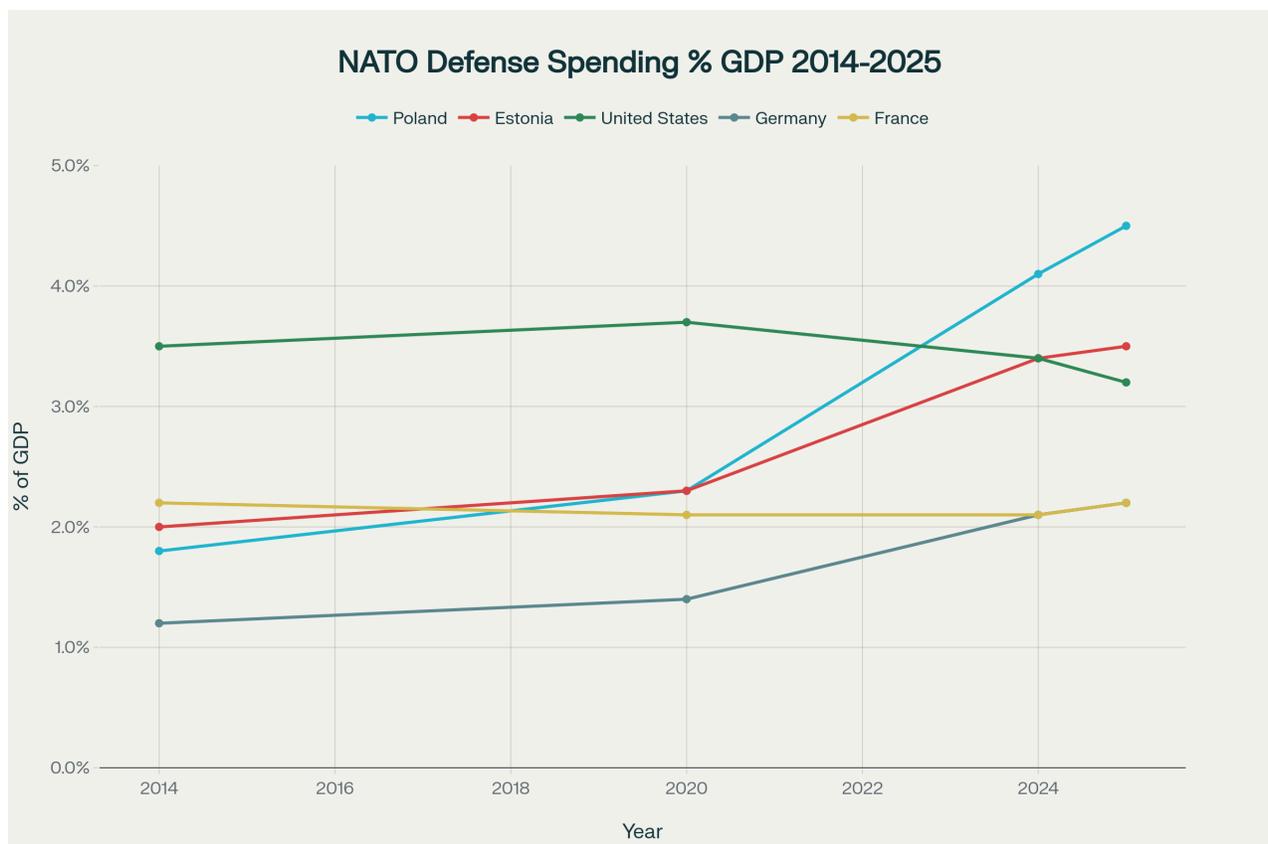
Section II: The European Perspective – Between Strategic Autonomy and Internal Fragmentation

From Guaranteed Security to Conditional Partnership

The transatlantic alliance's foundational assumption—that American security guarantees were essentially unconditional—has collapsed by 2025. The June NATO Hague Summit's commitment to 5% of GDP defense spending represents Europe's acknowledgment that security is now transactional. This shift from guarantee to conditional arrangement fundamentally alters European strategic calculations.^{[4][6]}

The 5% target breaks down into 3.5% for core defense requirements and 1.5% for broader security investments including critical infrastructure, cyber defense, and defense industrial capacity. For most European allies, this represents more than doubling current spending levels. Germany, spending 2.1% in 2024, must reach 3.5% by 2035—an increase requiring approximately €100 billion annually.^{[8][17]}

Figure 1: NATO Defense Spending Trends (2014-2025) illustrates the stark divergence between Eastern and Western European responses. Poland leads at 4.5% of GDP, with the Baltic states following closely, while major Western European powers lag significantly behind new requirements.



NATO Defense Spending Trends (2014-2025): Eastern European countries show dramatic increases while Western Europe lags

Europe's Uneven Strategic Awakening

European responses to American retrenchment reveal deep internal divisions. Eastern European states—Poland, the Baltics, Finland—treat the security threat as existential and respond with

dramatic spending increases and closer US alignment. These countries have surpassed the traditional 2% NATO target and are approaching the new 3.5% requirement ahead of schedule.^[17]

Western European reactions are more ambivalent. Germany's defense budget increases remain gradual despite facing the largest absolute spending gaps. France emphasizes "European sovereignty" but resists defense spending increases that would require significant social program cuts. Italy and Spain show even greater reluctance to meet enhanced spending targets.^{[18][17]}

This East-West divide reflects fundamentally different threat perceptions. Eastern European leaders view Russian aggression through the lens of historical occupation and current geographical proximity. Western European leaders balance security concerns against economic costs and domestic political constraints.^[17]

The Trump-von der Leyen Trade Agreement: Economics as Security Policy

The July 2025 Trump-von der Leyen tariff agreement exposes the extent to which economic and security policies have become intertwined. The deal established a 15% tariff ceiling on most EU exports to the US, with zero tariffs on strategic products including aircraft components, semiconductors, and critical raw materials.^{[19][20]}

However, the agreement's most significant aspect may be its conditionality. The US demanded that the EU align with American trade restrictions on both China and Russia as part of the security relationship. This linkage transforms trade policy into a loyalty test: European access to American markets becomes conditional on supporting US economic warfare against strategic competitors.^{[20][19]}

The agreement's fragility became apparent within weeks when Trump threatened 250% tariffs on EU pharmaceuticals despite the recent deal. This pattern—escalating pressure followed by negotiations under duress—reflects Trump's transactional approach to alliance management.^[20]

The Challenge of Strategic Autonomy

Europe's aspiration for strategic autonomy faces the fundamental challenge of achieving coordination among 27 sovereign members with divergent interests. The ReArm Europe Plan,

allocating €150 billion through the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument, represents the most ambitious attempt yet to coordinate European defense spending.^[21]

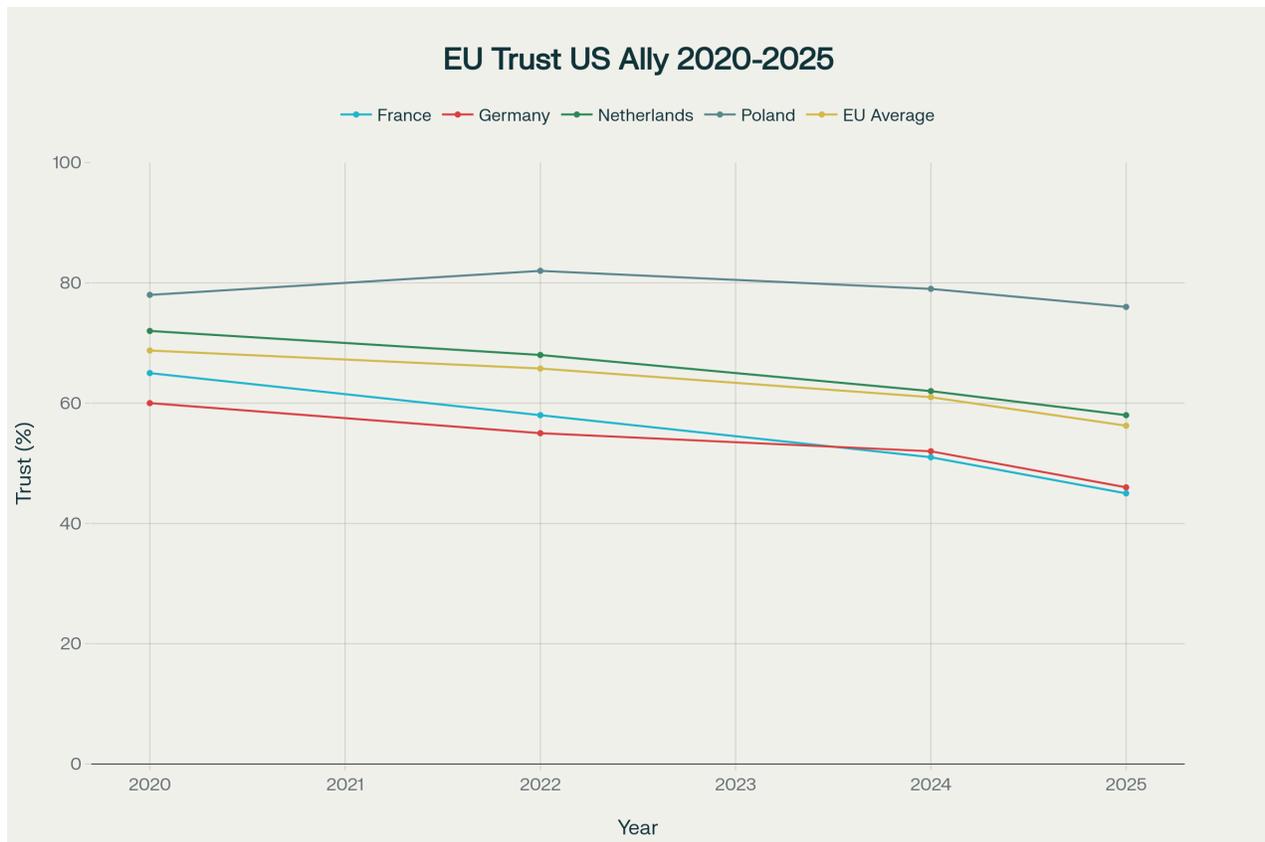
However, implementation faces numerous obstacles. Hungary routinely blocks EU sanctions and defense cooperation measures. The European Peace Facility, originally central to Ukraine support, has been sidelined due to Hungarian vetoes. Major defense procurement decisions still require unanimity, making the EU hostage to its least cooperative member.^{[22][23][24]}

The challenge extends beyond formal procedures to strategic culture differences. Nordic countries prioritize territorial defense and NATO interoperability. Mediterranean countries focus on migration and terrorism threats from the south. Central European states emphasize deterrence against Russia.^[22]

Public Opinion and the Trust Deficit

European public opinion reflects growing skepticism about American reliability, undermining the political foundations of transatlantic cooperation. Trust in the US as a reliable ally has declined sharply across major EU countries. French trust fell from 65% in 2020 to 45% in 2025; German trust dropped from 60% to 46% over the same period.^[19]

Figure 2: Declining European Trust in US Reliability (2020-2025) shows this erosion of confidence has been consistent across most EU members, with Poland as a notable exception due to its continued strong security dependence on the United States.



Declining European Trust in US Reliability (2020-2025): Erosion of transatlantic confidence

This trust deficit creates a vicious cycle: European doubts about American reliability reduce political support for burden-sharing, which reinforces American perceptions of European free-riding, leading to further US retrenchment.^[9]

European Defense Industrial Challenges

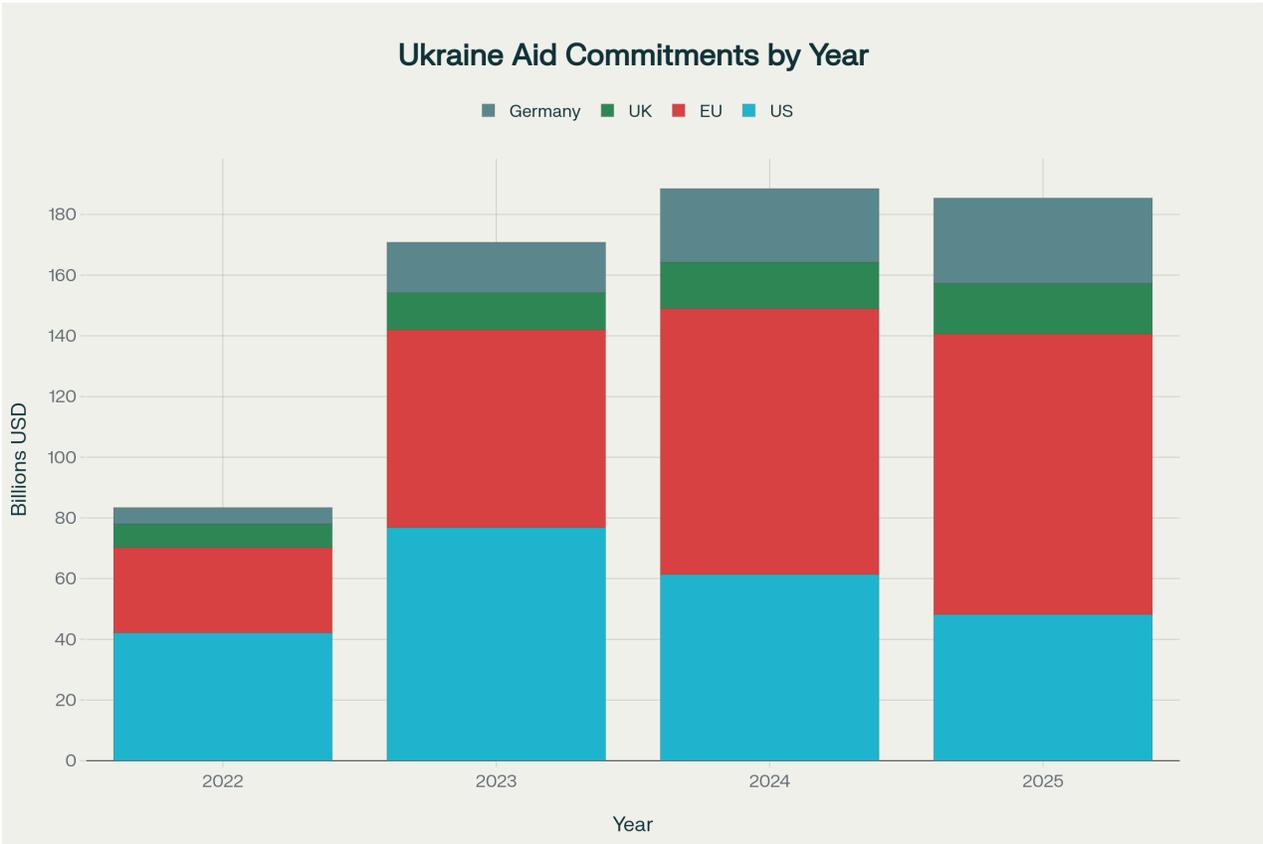
Europe's strategic autonomy aspirations face the reality of underdeveloped defense industrial capacity. The European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) identifies a €1.8 trillion investment gap accumulated since the end of the Cold War. Current European defense production cannot meet wartime consumption rates demonstrated in Ukraine, let alone supply a broader conflict.^{[25][26]}

The European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) aims to address these shortfalls through coordinated procurement and industrial cooperation. However, the €300 million EDIRPA budget through 2025 is insufficient for the scale of required investment. Industry estimates suggest €100 billion in EU budget support over the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework would be necessary to achieve meaningful defense industrial autonomy.^{[26][25]}

The Paradox of Uneven Autonomy

Europe in 2025 presents a paradox: rising defense ambitions coupled with persistent internal divisions. European aid to Ukraine has surpassed American contributions by 2025, reaching over \$92 billion compared to declining US support. Yet this achievement masks deep coordination problems and the continued inability to achieve consensus on sanctions, arms supplies, or strategic objectives.^[27]

Figure 3: Ukraine Aid Commitments (2022-2025) demonstrates Europe's growing financial leadership in supporting Ukraine, but also reveals the fragmentation of this effort across multiple bilateral channels rather than coordinated EU action.



Ukraine Aid Commitments (2022-2025): European support surpasses US contributions

The result is what can be termed **uneven autonomy**: Europe aspires to strategic independence but lacks the institutional cohesion to achieve it. Individual European states and sub-regional coalitions develop significant capabilities, but the EU as a whole cannot act decisively when unanimity is required.^[22]

This fragmentation serves neither European interests nor alliance stability. It provides insufficient reassurance to Eastern European members facing direct Russian pressure while failing to offer the United States a credible alternative to continued military leadership in European defense.

To transcend such obstacles and translate uneven autonomy into effective group action, the EU can further the implementation of coordinated defense and industrial policies through such initiatives as the ReArm Europe Plan and Readiness 2030. Envisaged since 2025 and unlocking the mobilization of almost €800 billion of joint and national defense funds over the next decade, this plan will be supported with fiscal flexibility clauses and with investment instruments from the EU like the Security Action for Europe (SAFE). Strengthening European defense industrial capacity, reducing dependency on external suppliers of core technologies and interoperability through coordinated procurement are central objectives. Moreover, governance reforms to reduce veto powers on crucial security and sanctions decisions and enhanced EU-UK cooperation can mitigate internal fragmentation. Economic de-risking measures, including supply chain diversification and energy resilience projects like RePowerEU, complement these efforts by reducing vulnerabilities exposed by recent geopolitical crises. By pursuing such integrated strategies combining defense, industrial, economic, and institutional reforms, the EU can build a more cohesive and credible strategic autonomy, assuring Eastern European members under direct Russian pressure and presenting a credible partnership to the United States in shared defense responsibilities.

Section III: The Russian Perspective – Opportunistic Exploitation of Transatlantic Divisions

Reading American Retrenchment as Strategic Opportunity

Russian strategic thinking has long held that NATO's strength depends fundamentally on sustained American political will rather than formal treaty obligations. When Trump openly questions Article 5 guarantees or frames NATO commitments as conditional on European burden-sharing, Moscow interprets this as confirmation of anticipated Western decline.^{[1][2]}

The September 2025 Article 4 invocations by Poland and Estonia provided Russia with a valuable test case. Moscow's calculation appears to be that drone incursions and airspace violations will elicit measured NATO responses rather than escalatory reactions, thereby demonstrating alliance brittleness under pressure.^{[2][5][3][28][1]}

Russian analysis likely focuses on the gap between NATO's formal procedures and American political commitment. Article 4 consultations represent collective concern, but Washington's reluctance to treat hybrid attacks as serious threats signals that Russia can probe alliance cohesion without triggering major retaliation.^{[3][2]}

Hybrid Warfare and Gray-Zone Operations

Russia's 2025 strategy combines direct military pressure in Ukraine with systematic gray-zone operations across NATO's eastern frontier. The drone incursions into Poland involved 19-23 unmanned systems, forcing airspace closures at major airports and triggering NATO quick reaction alerts. Similar airspace violations occurred in Estonia and Romania, creating a pattern of low-level but persistent pressure.^{[5][15][28]}

These operations serve multiple strategic purposes. First, they test NATO response times and procedures, providing intelligence on alliance decision-making processes. Second, they create escalatory pressure that forces NATO to choose between accommodation and escalation, with either choice serving Russian interests.^[2]

Third, they demonstrate Russian capability to project power beyond Ukraine's borders while remaining below thresholds that would trigger Article 5 responses. This creates a zone of ambiguity where Russian actions are clearly provocative but not sufficiently dramatic to compel decisive Western retaliation.^[3]

Narrative Warfare and the "Declining West" Theme

Russia's most effective weapon may be its strategic narrative rather than its military capabilities. Russian information operations consistently promote the theme of inevitable Western decline and multipolar world order. Every NATO hesitation, every EU internal division, every transatlantic trade dispute becomes evidence supporting this narrative.^{[16][29]}

Russian state media and proxy outlets amplify Western self-criticism and internal debates to international audiences. When American officials question NATO burden-sharing arrangements or European leaders call for strategic autonomy, Russian information operations present these as proof of alliance disintegration.^{[30][31]}

This approach is particularly effective in the Global South, where Russian media outlets like RT have expanded operations precisely as American soft power infrastructure contracts. The dissolution of USAID and cuts to American cultural and educational programs create information vacuums that Russian outlets systematically exploit.^{[12][13][30]}

Exploiting European Internal Divisions

Russia leverages European internal divisions through multiple channels. Hungary under Viktor Orbán serves as the most visible example, routinely blocking EU sanctions, threatening to veto Ukraine aid, and maintaining warm relations with Moscow despite the ongoing war.^{[22][23][32]}

Russian influence operations target European decision-making processes that require unanimity. By cultivating relationships with even one or two EU member governments, Russia can paralyze collective European action on sanctions, defense cooperation, or strategic initiatives.^{[24][22]}

The European Peace Facility, originally designed to coordinate military aid to Ukraine, has been effectively sidelined due to Hungarian objections. This forces other EU members to pursue ad hoc arrangements that are less efficient and provide fewer opportunities for strategic coordination.^{[22][24]}

The Balkans as a Secondary Theater

Russia treats the Western Balkans as a low-cost, high-impact arena for demonstrating Western weakness. Support for Republika Srpska's secessionist rhetoric, encouragement of Serbian balancing between East and West, and exploitation of Kosovo tensions require minimal Russian investment while creating significant Western headaches.^{[33][34][35]}

Milorad Dodik's escalating secessionist moves in Bosnia represent a particularly clear example. Russia provides political cover and rhetorical support for these actions, while Western responses remain fragmented between EU diplomatic pressure and American sanctions that lack consistent enforcement. Countries like Slovenia, where Dodik stores and invests a lot of his money, have only recently declared sanctions on the figure banning his entry, and rather than obscuring his presence he is able to rely on Hungary to further continue his moves in Srpska Krajina.^{[34][35][36][37][33]}

The strategic logic is clear: instability in the Balkans forces NATO and EU attention away from Ukraine and demonstrates Western inability to maintain stability even in regions considered successfully integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures.^{[38][33]}

Ukraine as Leverage for Systemic Change

For Russia, Ukraine represents more than territorial conquest; it serves as the mechanism through which the post-1991 European order can be fundamentally revised. Putin's expectation appears to be that sustained pressure combined with American retrenchment will eventually force a negotiated settlement that legitimizes spheres of influence.^{[39][40]}

Such an outcome would establish precedent extending far beyond Ukraine. If Western powers acknowledge Russian spheres of influence in exchange for conflict termination, this validates Moscow's broader challenge to universal human rights and democratic governance principles.^[16]

Trump's February 2025 confrontational meeting with Zelenskyy, followed by temporary suspension of military aid, likely encouraged Russian calculations that American support for Ukraine is ultimately conditional and negotiable. Russian officials praised the outcome of that meeting and directed criticism toward Zelenskyy rather than Washington.^[39]

Strategic Synthesis: Patience and Pressure

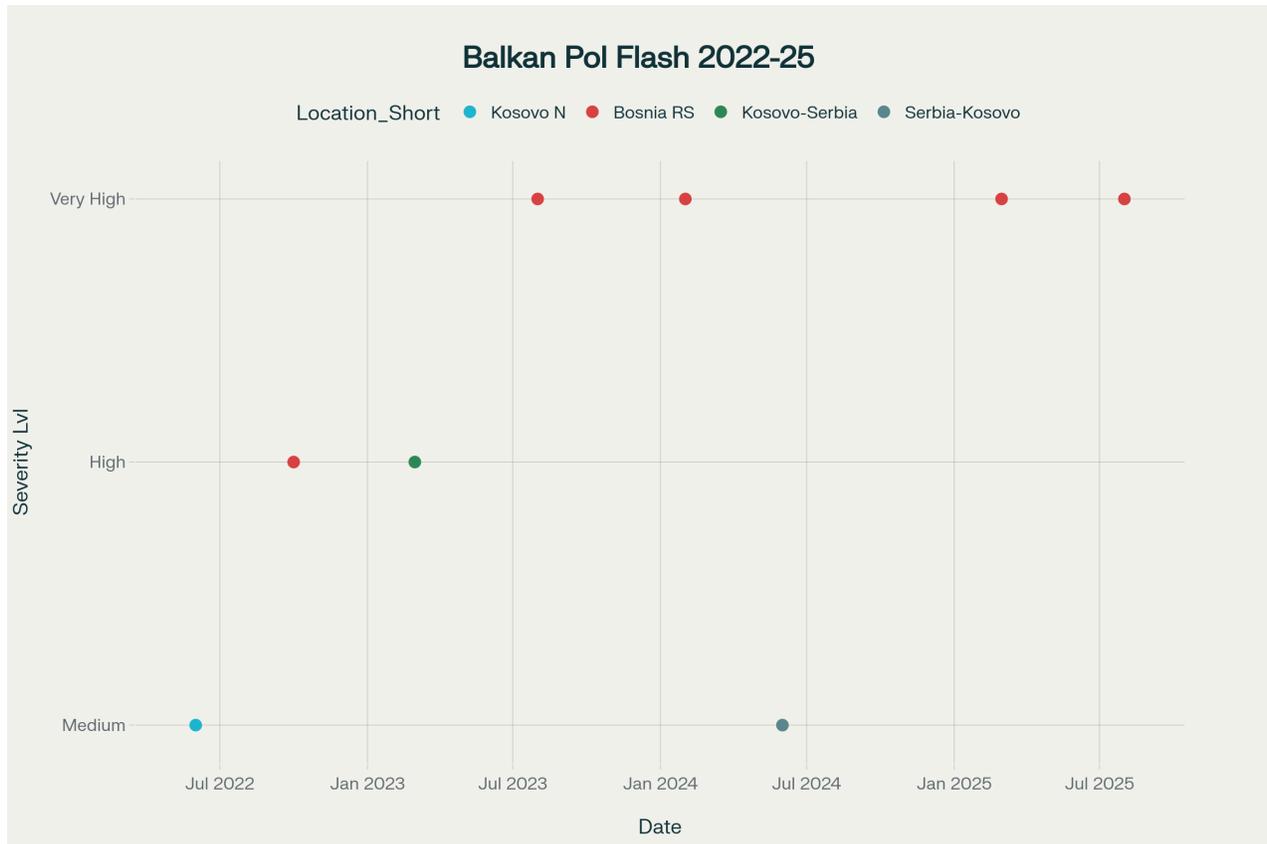
The Russian perspective in 2025 reflects confidence that time favors Moscow's position. American political fatigue, European internal divisions, and the high costs of supporting Ukraine create pressure for negotiated settlement on terms favorable to Russian interests.^{[40][41]}

Russia does not need to achieve decisive military victory to accomplish strategic objectives. Demonstrating Western inability to maintain unity and resolve may be sufficient to discourage future challenges to Russian actions elsewhere.^{[16][29]}

Every Article 4 consultation that produces limited responses, every EU summit that fails to reach consensus, every American debate about burden-sharing provides evidence for Russian claims about Western decline and multipolar world order.^{[30][31]}

Moscow's strategy appears designed to exploit precisely the dynamics identified in Sections I and II: American transactional retrenchment and European uneven autonomy create opportunities for

persistent pressure that gradually erodes Western credibility without requiring dramatic escalation.^[16]



Balkan Political Flashpoints (2022-2025): Escalating regional tensions and crisis frequency

Section IV: The Balkan Perspective – Regional Fragility as Global Bellwether

The Balkans as a Test of Western Institutional Credibility

The Western Balkans represent a unique laboratory for measuring the erosion of Euro-Atlantic influence. Unlike Ukraine, these are territories where NATO and EU intervention succeeded in terminating conflicts and establishing frameworks for democratic development. The region's current instability therefore reflects not the limits of Western power projection, but the decay of previously successful Western-led arrangements and shows cracks in how the Western structure operates in the Balkans.^{[38][34]}

The 1995 Dayton Accords and 1999 Kosovo intervention seemingly established Western credibility as conflict managers capable of imposing sustainable peace settlements. By 2025, that

same region has become a symbol of Western institutional fatigue and declining resolve to maintain complex post-conflict arrangements. Many structures put in place by the western system ,now years on, reflect problems that the region is facing.^{[33][38]}

Table 2: Balkan Political Flashpoints (2022-2025) illustrates the accelerating frequency and severity of regional crises, with eight major incidents culminating in the August 2025 referendum call by Republika Srpska—the most serious challenge to Bosnia's constitutional order since Dayton.^[37]

| Date | Location | Type | Severity | Description |
|---------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------|---|
| June 2022 | Kosovo North | Ethnic Clashes | Medium | Clashes between ethnic Serbs and Albanians, increasing tensions and sporadic violence. |
| October 2022 | Bosnia RS | Secessionist Rhetoric | High | Milorad Dodik and Republika Srpska pushing for independence, undermining Bosnia's sovereignty. |
| March 2023 | Kosovo-Serbia Border | Military Buildup | High | Serbian troop movements near Kosovo border causing regional alarm and risk of escalation. |
| August 2023 | Bosnia RS | All-Serb Declaration | Very High | Republika Srpska's formal declaration escalating secessionist claims rejecting central authority. |
| February 2024 | Bosnia RS | Constitutional Crisis | Very High | RS passing laws ignoring Bosnian state institutions, deepening institutional crisis. |
| June 2024 | Serbia-Kosovo | Diplomatic Incident | Medium | Heightened diplomatic tensions including boycotts and breakdowns in negotiations. |
| March 2025 | Bosnia RS | Anti-Judiciary Laws | Very High | Laws targeting judiciary, weakening rule of law and state credibility. |
| August 2025 | Bosnia RS | Referendum Call | Very High | Dodik announces referendum on RS independence, risking constitutional crisis and conflict. |

Serbia's Sophisticated Balancing Strategy

Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić has developed the most sophisticated approach to exploiting great power competition. Belgrade simultaneously pursues EU accession negotiations, maintains military cooperation agreements with Russia, and seeks Chinese investment in critical infrastructure. This multi-vector foreign policy extracts concessions from all sides while avoiding definitive commitment to any.^[42]

Trump's transactional diplomacy enhances Serbia's room for maneuver. Vučić's failed attempt to meet Trump at Mar-a-Lago in May 2025, despite being denied entry to the Republican fundraiser, demonstrates both Serbia's desperation for American recognition and Washington's disengagement from Balkan management. The incident left Vučić politically weakened domestically while highlighting American inattention to regional dynamics.^[42]

Serbian energy dependence on Russia provides Moscow with significant leverage despite broader European efforts to reduce such ties. Serbia's refusal to join EU sanctions against Russia reflects both economic interests and cultural affinities that Western policy has failed to counter effectively.^{[43][42]}

Bosnia's Constitutional Crisis and Secessionist Momentum

Republika Srpska's constitutional challenge represents the most serious threat to Bosnian statehood since the 1992-95 war. Milorad Dodik's systematic undermining of state-level institutions has accelerated dramatically in 2025, culminating in laws barring Bosnian state police and judiciary from RS territory.^{[34][36]}

The February 2025 court conviction sentencing Dodik to one year in prison and a six-year ban from public office triggered RS legislation that effectively nullifies central government authority within the entity. Dodik's August 2025 call for a referendum on these judicial decisions represents a direct challenge to the Dayton framework.^{[36][37][34]}

Western responses have been fragmented and ineffective. American sanctions exist but lack consistent enforcement. EU diplomatic pressure produces statements of concern but no meaningful consequences. The Office of the High Representative, designed to enforce compliance with Dayton, has been reduced to issuing warnings that carry little credible threat.^{[34][36]}

Kosovo's Fragile Independence and Northern Tensions

Kosovo represents both Western intervention's "success" and its most vulnerable achievement that poses an unresolved legal and moral issue to this day. NATO's 1999 military campaign and subsequent independence recognition in 2008 established precedent for humanitarian intervention and self-determination. Yet Kosovo's sovereignty remains contested by Serbia, Russia, and several EU members.^{[28][38]}

Tensions in northern Kosovo, where Serbian-majority municipalities resist Pristina's authority, create recurring flashpoints that test KFOR's peacekeeping mandate. These incidents serve Russian information warfare by drawing parallels between Kosovo's independence and separatist claims in Donbas: "If Kosovo can secede, why not Donetsk?"^[38]

KFOR's credibility depends heavily on American leadership, making US retrenchment particularly problematic for Kosovo's long-term stability. European allies lack the military capacity and political will to maintain Kosovo peacekeeping without substantial American participation.^[38]

On the other hand EU mandated Kosovo war court in Hague is facing problem with the witness testimonies against the accused like the ex Kosovar leader Hashim Thaci, and continued trial demands firm EU and Western commitment.

EU Enlargement Fatigue and Credibility Gaps

The European Union's promise of membership for Western Balkan states has lost credibility by 2025. Enlargement fatigue among existing members combines with internal EU crises to make expansion politically impossible. Hungarian obstruction of EU decision-making provides additional veto points for blocking enlargement progress.^{[22][38]}

Without credible EU membership prospects, regional leaders lack incentives for painful domestic reforms. Vučić delays judicial and media reforms, Dodik escalates secessionist rhetoric, and Kosovo leaders resist dialogue with Serbia because they doubt Western follow-through on promises.^{[38][34]}

This credibility gap creates opportunities for external actors. Russia offers alternative partnerships without demanding democratic reforms or human rights compliance. China provides investment

without governance conditionality. Both alternatives appear more reliable than EU promises of eventual membership.^[38]

The Regional Multiplier Effect

Balkan instability serves as a multiplier of broader Western credibility problems. Each crisis demonstrates to other regions that Western security guarantees and institutional arrangements are conditional and potentially temporary. This has implications extending far beyond the Balkans themselves.^[38]

If NATO cannot maintain stability in Bosnia—a territory where it successfully intervened and imposed peace settlements—why should Eastern European allies trust Article 5 guarantees in the face of Russian pressure? If the EU cannot fulfill membership promises to Balkan applicants after two decades of negotiations, what credibility do EU security partnerships have elsewhere?^[38]

Russian information operations systematically exploit these connections, presenting Balkan failures as evidence of broader Western decline. Every secessionist speech in Banja Luka or ethnic clash in northern Kosovo becomes proof that Western institutions cannot deliver on their promises.^[30]

Strategic Synthesis: Local Fragility, Global Implications

The Balkan perspective reveals how local institutional weakness amplifies systemic challenges to Western credibility. The region's problems are not primarily military—no major external invasion threatens Balkan states—but rather institutional and political.^{[38][34]}

Western failures in the Balkans result from the same dynamics identified in earlier sections: American disengagement reduces conflict management capacity while European internal divisions prevent effective collective action. Russia exploits these gaps through low-cost influence operations that achieve disproportionate destabilizing effects.^[38]

The ultimate danger is not Balkan conflict per se, but the precedent such conflicts establish for Western institutional credibility globally. If Euro-Atlantic structures cannot maintain stability in their most successful intervention zones, their deterrent effect elsewhere inevitably diminishes.^[38]

Section V: Ukraine as the Central Test Case

Ukraine as the Fulcrum of Transatlantic Credibility

Ukraine has evolved beyond a regional conflict to become the definitive test of Western institutional credibility and strategic coherence. For NATO, Ukraine represents the ultimate measure of deterrent effect: if Russia succeeds in Ukraine, doubts about Article 5 guarantees will inevitably spread to the Baltic states and Poland. For the European Union, Ukraine tests whether Europe can act as a geopolitical power or remains primarily an economic organization with foreign policy aspirations.^{[39][27][40][44]}

For Russia, Ukraine serves as the mechanism through which the entire post-Cold War European order can be revised. A negotiated settlement acknowledging Russian territorial gains would establish precedent legitimizing spheres of influence and great power prerogatives over smaller neighbors.^{[41][39]}

The February 2025 Trump-Zelenskyy Oval Office meeting crystallized these stakes. The confrontational encounter, ending without agreement and followed by temporary suspension of US military aid, demonstrated that American support for Ukraine is no longer unconditional. Russian officials praised the meeting's outcome, interpreting it as validation of their patient approach to Western fatigue.^[39]

American Policy Oscillations and Strategic Ambiguity

American policy toward Ukraine under Trump has oscillated between rhetorical support and practical withdrawal, creating dangerous strategic ambiguity. Trump's September 2025 declaration that Ukraine "can win back all territory from Russia" marked a dramatic reversal from earlier positions advocating territorial concessions.^{[41][45][46]}

This policy volatility appears driven more by frustration with Putin's unwillingness to negotiate than by strategic reassessment of Ukrainian capabilities. Trump's earlier meeting with Putin in Alaska failed to produce expected diplomatic breakthrough, leading to American recalibration rather than sustained policy commitment.^{[40][45][41]}

The strategic danger lies in American policy unpredictability rather than consistent opposition or support. Adversaries and allies alike cannot calculate American responses to specific escalatory scenarios, increasing risks of miscalculation by all parties.^{[39][40]}

European Assumption of Primary Responsibility

Europe has effectively become Ukraine's primary supporter by 2025, providing over \$186 billion in total assistance compared to declining American contributions. This represents a fundamental shift from early war dynamics when American military aid dominated international support.^{[27][44]}

Earlier figure 3: Ukraine Aid Commitments (2022-2025) demonstrates this transition clearly: EU aid has grown from \$28.1 billion in 2022 to \$92.4 billion in 2025, while American aid peaked at \$76.8 billion in 2023 before declining to \$48.2 billion in 2025.

However, European leadership remains fragmented across multiple bilateral channels rather than coordinated through EU institutions. The European Peace Facility, designed to coordinate military assistance, has been marginalized due to Hungarian vetoes. This forces member states to pursue ad hoc arrangements that reduce efficiency and strategic coherence.^{[22][24][44][27]}

The Article 4 Precedent and Escalation Management

The September 2025 Article 4 invocations by Poland and Estonia over Russian drone incursions established critical precedent for NATO's approach to hybrid warfare. The consultations revealed fundamental disagreement about escalation thresholds: Eastern European members treated airspace violations as potential Article 5 triggers, while Washington emphasized restraint and proportionality.^{[1][2][3]}

This gap in threat perception creates opportunities for Russian pressure campaigns designed to probe alliance cohesion. Moscow's calculation appears to be that persistent low-level provocations will either elicit disproportionate NATO responses—enabling Russian escalation—or inadequate NATO responses—demonstrating alliance weakness.^{[2][5][28][1]}

NATO's response through "Operation Eastern Sentry," enhancing air patrols along the eastern frontier, represents an attempt to demonstrate resolve without escalation. However, the operation's effectiveness depends on sustained political commitment that may not survive future provocations.^{[3][2]}

Economic Leverage and Energy Dependencies

The July 2025 Trump-von der Leyen trade agreement embedded Ukraine policy within broader transatlantic economic arrangements. European commitments to reduce Chinese trade and eliminate remaining Russian energy imports became conditions for American tariff restraint.^{[19][20][47]}

European implementation faces significant obstacles. Hungary and Slovakia maintain extensive Russian energy dependencies that make rapid decoupling economically disruptive. von der Leyen's commitment to "put tariffs on oil supplies still coming to the European Union" represents acknowledgment that energy ties with Russia remain substantial.^{[47][23]}

These economic linkages create additional pressure points for Russian influence operations. Energy supply disruptions or price spikes can be timed to coincide with critical political decisions about Ukraine support, creating domestic pressure for accommodation.^{[23][32]}

Scenarios for Ukraine's Future and Their Systemic Implications

Negotiated Settlement

A Trump-mediated agreement freezing current territorial divisions would provide short-term conflict termination while establishing long-term precedent for spheres of influence. Such an outcome would validate Russian strategic patience and encourage similar pressure campaigns elsewhere.^{[39][41]}

Protracted Conflict

Continued war without decisive outcome would strain European resources while testing American political commitment over time. Ukrainian fatigue combined with Western aid reduction could eventually force territorial concessions despite continued resistance.^{[44][48]}

Russian Escalation and Spillover

Russian pressure extending beyond Ukraine through increased Balkan destabilization or Baltic provocations would test whether Article 4 consultations can evolve into Article 5 responses. American retrenchment makes such escalation more likely while reducing NATO's capacity for effective response.^[38]

European Strategic Autonomy Success

Sustained European aid enabling Ukrainian success while developing independent European defense capabilities would represent the most favorable outcome for long-term transatlantic relations. However, this scenario requires overcoming current internal European divisions and achieving unprecedented defense industrial coordination. From here the question of whether Europe is suited to rearm is posed and continued European support and backing would inevitably lead to continued tragic loss of life in Ukraine which is getting higher and higher on average.^{[18][26][44]}

Ukraine as Mirror of Transatlantic Dynamics

Ukraine reflects and amplifies every dimension of transatlantic crisis identified in previous sections. American transactional retrenchment appears in oscillating policy commitments and conditional aid arrangements. European uneven autonomy manifests in substantial financial commitments undermined by institutional fragmentation.^{[39][27][44][48]}

Russian opportunism exploits both American inconsistency and European division through sustained pressure campaigns and information operations. Balkan parallels provide alternative models for territorial revision and great power accommodation that could be applied to Ukrainian settlement.^{[38][40][41]}

The ultimate stakes extend beyond Ukraine itself to the credibility of Western institutions globally. As one analysis noted, "Ukraine is not only fighting for its sovereignty—it is fighting for the credibility of the entire Euro-Atlantic system".^[41]

Whether that system emerges strengthened or weakened from this test will determine the international order for decades to come.

Conclusion: The Transatlantic Order at an Inflection Point

Synthesis of Perspectives and Strategic Dynamics

This analysis has examined the crisis of the transatlantic order through five interconnected perspectives that collectively reveal a system under unprecedented strain. The American perspective demonstrates transactional retrenchment—maintaining military capabilities while

reducing political commitments and making security guarantees conditional on burden-sharing arrangements. The European perspective shows uneven autonomy—rising defense ambitions and financial contributions undermined by persistent internal divisions and institutional fragmentation.^{[22][27][9][12]}

The Russian perspective reveals systematic opportunism—exploiting Western divisions through hybrid warfare, information operations, and patient pressure designed to demonstrate declining Western credibility. The Balkan perspective illustrates how local institutional weakness amplifies global credibility problems, turning previously successful Western interventions into symbols of contemporary Western decline.^{[38][34][16][30]}

Finally, the Ukrainian perspective integrates all these dynamics, serving as the central test case where American reliability, European cohesion, Russian patience, and regional stability converge. Ukraine's outcome will determine whether the post-Cold War European order survives, adapts, or gives way to spheres of influence and great power accommodation.^{[39][27]}

Key Findings and Their Implications

The evidence presented supports several critical conclusions about the trajectory of transatlantic relations:

American Conditional Engagement: The United States remains militarily engaged but politically disengaged, creating dangerous strategic ambiguity. Trump's oscillations between supporting Ukrainian territorial integrity and advocating negotiated settlements based on territorial concessions reflect domestic political calculations rather than consistent strategic assessment. This unpredictability undermines deterrence while encouraging adversary risk-taking.^{[41][45]}

European Financial Leadership Without Strategic Coherence: Europe has assumed primary financial responsibility for Ukraine support, providing over \$186 billion compared to declining American contributions. However, this leadership remains fragmented across bilateral channels rather than coordinated through EU institutions, reducing strategic effectiveness and enabling spoiler states like Hungary to undermine collective action.^{[22][24][27]}

Russian Strategic Patience: Moscow's approach reflects confidence that time favors Russian interests. Rather than seeking decisive military victory, Russia pursues sustained pressure designed

to demonstrate Western institutional weakness. Each Article 4 consultation that produces limited responses, each EU summit that fails to reach consensus, and each American debate about burden-sharing provides evidence supporting Russian narratives of Western decline.^{[16][30]}

Institutional Credibility Crisis: The crisis extends beyond immediate security concerns to fundamental questions about Western institutional effectiveness. NATO's ability to respond to hybrid threats, the EU's capacity for collective action, and America's reliability as a security guarantor are all under examination simultaneously.^{[38][9]}

Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

The analysis suggests several priority areas for policy intervention:

For the United States: Clarify the scope and conditions of security commitments to reduce strategic ambiguity. Restore development assistance and cultural programs to counter Russian information operations in critical regions. Balance Indo-Pacific priorities with European commitments to avoid creating false choices between theater requirements.^{[9][12][13]}

For European Union members: Accelerate defense industrial integration to match financial pledges with capability development. Reform decision-making procedures to prevent single-state vetoes on critical security issues. Strengthen EU-UK cooperation to avoid duplication and maximize resource utilization.^{[22][18][25][26]}

For NATO: Develop clear response frameworks for hybrid threats that bridge the gap between Article 4 consultations and Article 5 responses. Strengthen rapid response capabilities for gray-zone conflicts that fall below traditional attack thresholds. Maintain credible deterrence in Eastern Europe while managing escalation risks.^{[1][2][5][3]}

For Balkan Policy: Reinforce international presence in Bosnia and Kosovo with clearer deterrent mandates. Link EU assistance to concrete progress on rule of law while ensuring accession promises remain credible. Counter Russian influence through targeted support for independent media and civil society organizations.^{[38][34][36][30]}

Forward-Looking Assessment

The transatlantic order faces a fundamental choice between adaptation and decline. The Cold War model of American leadership with European followership is ending, but its replacement remains unclear. Three scenarios appear possible:^{[9][11]}

Managed Transition: America maintains lighter but credible commitments while Europe develops genuine strategic autonomy within alliance frameworks. This requires overcoming current internal European divisions while maintaining American political engagement.^{[18][9]}

Fragmented Accommodation: Continued American retrenchment combined with European fragmentation leads to ad hoc arrangements and eventually spheres of influence accommodation with Russia. This represents the most likely trajectory under current trends.^[16]

Renewed Partnership: External pressure catalyzes renewed transatlantic cooperation based on more balanced burden-sharing and clearer role definitions. This would require leadership changes and strategic vision currently absent from both sides of the Atlantic.^[11]

The Ukrainian Crucible

Ukraine remains the immediate test case for these broader dynamics. The conflict's outcome will signal whether Western institutions can adapt to new strategic realities or will fragment under pressure. A negotiated settlement based on territorial concessions would validate Russian strategic patience and encourage similar pressure campaigns globally. Continued European support enabling Ukrainian success could demonstrate renewed Western effectiveness but requires unprecedented coordination.^{[39][27][41]}

The ultimate question is not whether individual Western powers retain significant capabilities—they clearly do—but whether Western institutions can function effectively in an era of great power competition. The answer will determine international order for the next generation.^{[16][11]}

The human toll of the war in Ukraine casts a shadow over every discussion of strategy, deterrence, or alliance credibility. By late 2025, Western intelligence estimates that Russia has lost around **120,000 soldiers killed and 360,000 wounded**, while Ukraine has endured **70,000 killed and 210,000 wounded** in defense of its sovereignty. Civilian casualties, confirmed by the United Nations, stand at more than **11,000 killed and 22,000 wounded**, though the real numbers are

almost certainly far higher in areas beyond independent monitoring. These statistics are not abstractions but lives extinguished and families shattered. They raise an unsettling question: how much longer can external actors continue to fuel a war whose price is measured most starkly in human suffering? As the transatlantic alliance debates tariffs, aid packages, and the credibility of Article 5, the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine is a reminder that the cost of geopolitical rivalry is borne above all by soldiers in trenches and civilians under bombardment. The war is not only a test of Western resolve, but also a test of conscience—whether the pursuit of strategic goals justifies the relentless loss of life, and what moral responsibility lies with those who sustain the conflict from afar.

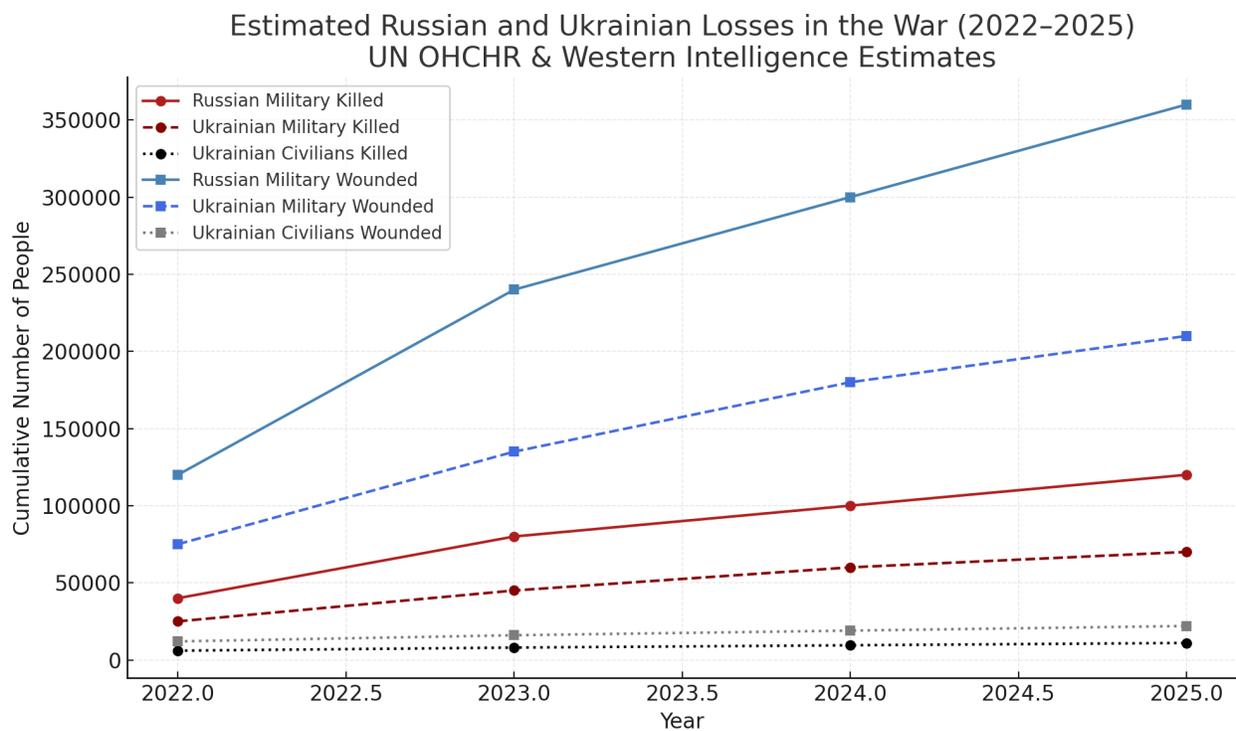


Figure 4. Estimated Russian and Ukrainian Losses in the War (2022–2025). Cumulative estimates of killed and wounded Russian and Ukrainian military personnel, and Ukrainian civilian casualties, based on UN OHCHR reporting and Western intelligence assessments.

(Sources taken from United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). 2025. *Ukraine: Civilian Casualty Update*. September, U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). 2025. *Ukraine War Casualty Estimates*. Washington, DC, UK Ministry of Defence (MoD). 2025. *Defence Intelligence Update: Russian Losses in Ukraine*. London.)

As this analysis began, the transatlantic bargain is not collapsing overnight but fraying at the seams, caught between American conditional engagement and European fragmented autonomy. Whether this fraying can be repaired or will accelerate into systemic breakdown remains the defining question of contemporary international relations.^{[9][30]}

The stakes could not be higher: the credibility of democratic governance, collective security arrangements, and rule-based international order all rest on the outcome of this test. Success requires recognizing the severity of current trends while maintaining capacity for strategic adaptation. Failure invites a return to great power spheres of influence and the international instability such arrangements have historically produced.

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