

# SWP Comment

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## ‘Everything about Ukraine without Ukraine’

Peace Negotiations in Trump’s Brave New World

Sabine Fischer

For the past three years, Ukraine has not allowed Russia to win its illegal war of aggression. During long periods of the war, the parties have found themselves in a military and diplomatic stalemate. Now US President Donald Trump has sided with the aggressor. “Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine”, the principle that has guided Western policy since February 2022, no longer applies for Washington. Trump has fundamentally changed both the international environment in which war is taking place and the balance between the parties, paving the way for Russia to dictate the terms of peace. To prevent this from happening, swift and decisive European action is essential. The new German government must play a key role here – and it must do so from its very first day in office.

Permanent ceasefires usually result from one of two possible war scenarios. If one side is the clear winner, it can impose the terms of the end of the war on its opponent and control how they are implemented. If neither side can win, the two parties have to reach the conclusion that continuing the war would be more costly than ending it. Such a *mutually hurting stalemate* can force the parties to the conflict to agree to a ceasefire and adhere to it over the long term. Neither option guarantees peace in the broader sense. For this to be achieved, justice and accountability for war crimes, as well as reparations and a change of attitude in the societies affected by the conflict are essential.

In any war, the balance of power on the battlefield sets the stage for negotiations and diplomatic solutions. The international backing of the belligerents and their domestic political stability play a role, too. These parameters are closely linked to how the conflict plays out. In Russia’s war against Ukraine, the parties have long been locked in *stalemate*. This stalemate, however, is not a mutually hurting one. The radical shift in US policy in early 2025 is now changing the balance at the international level – with what could be disastrous consequences for both Ukraine and Europe.



## 2025: Trump ends the stalemate

The new US administration has reversed what until now were four guiding principles of Western policy on Russia's all-out war against Ukraine. First, Trump is seeking to normalise relations with Russia. Second, he has broken with his predecessor's "as long as it takes" approach to Ukraine. Washington says it wants to end the war quickly; to this end, it is putting pressure on the victim of the aggression instead of the aggressor. Third, the new US administration is threatening to halt US military support for Kyiv while attempting to use economic blackmail. An end to American assistance would significantly worsen the military situation for Ukraine and could lead to the collapse of its defences. Fourth, the Trump administration is challenging the North Atlantic defence alliance and undermining the credibility of Western deterrence, thereby weakening the European allies and Ukraine vis-à-vis Russia.

In seeking rapprochement with Russia, the Trump administration has turned the international context of the war on its head. The US president has significantly strengthened Moscow's position by relinquishing important leverage mechanisms over the Putin regime without any pre-conditions. He is demanding territorial concessions from Kyiv and denying Ukraine the prospect of NATO membership or credible security guarantees. The American verbal attacks against President Volodymyr Zelensky reinforce the Kremlin's policy of regime change vis-à-vis Kyiv. At the same time, the Trump administration is threatening to break loose from the Western sanction regime against Russia. The US aligned with Russia in the United Nations General Assembly vote on the third anniversary of the full-scale invasion in February 2025. In March 2025, it withdrew from bodies documenting Russian war crimes and the mass abduction of Ukrainian children. Washington is no longer interested in Russia being held accountable after the war – another important concession for which Moscow had to do nothing in return.

We can only speculate about the motives driving the US administration. That Trump expects a boost to his personal image as "dealmaker" and "peace broker" is likely to play a key role. In general, the approach of the new US administration is characterised by a strong tendency towards personalisation. The relationship between the US president and Zelensky remains overshadowed by their fraught encounters during Trump's first term in office. On the other hand, Trump seems to admire the Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, whom he regularly refers to as a "friend", while his team seems to be working on the illusory assumption that the mere fact of a "deal" made by Trump would be enough to dissuade the warring parties from violating a ceasefire agreement. Another factor driving Trump's policy – and one that should not be underestimated – is the ideological proximity between the "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) camp and the Russian regime. Personalisation and ideological overlap only increase the imbalance in the US-Russia-Ukraine negotiating triangle in Moscow's favour. Meanwhile, some members of the Trump administration regard US involvement in Ukraine and the Middle East as an overextension that should be reduced. Others may see a chance to strengthen the position of the US vis-à-vis China through a rapprochement with Russia. However, the geopolitical motivations of the US administration remain unclear.

Owing to the radical change in American policy, Ukraine now finds itself between two fronts. On 28 February 2025, Trump and his vice-president, JD Vance, humiliated the Ukrainian head of state in front of the entire world during their meeting in the Oval Office of the White House. They thereby demonstrated just how far Washington has distanced itself from Kyiv. While Ukraine's leaders managed to offset this low blow with skilful diplomacy, they had to pay a high price. At talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on 11 March, Ukraine agreed to a one-month ceasefire; in return, Washington resumed military aid and the supply of intelligence data to Ukraine, both of which

had been suspended from 28 February. However, the Ukrainian-American relationship will continue to hang by a thread that could snap at any time.

For its part, Russia has been stepping up its military pressure on Ukraine since early 2025. It is using the room for manoeuvre provided by America's new policy to extract further concessions from Washington and marginalise Ukraine and its European backers – in other words, it is shaping the negotiating field in its own favour. At the same time, the Kremlin is seeking to broaden the spectrum of its relations with Washington in order to create transactional links between individual issues, relativise the significance of its war of aggression against Ukraine and strengthen its negotiating position.

Russia can also take advantage of the time pressure under which the Trump administration has put itself. Washington wants a quick deal and shows little interest in the complex details of a sustainable ceasefire agreement. This opens the door for the regime in Moscow to manipulate the talks, as the phone call between Putin and Trump on 18 March 2025 demonstrated: the Russian ruler made minimal concessions and linked further progress to Moscow's maximalist demands being met, including the immediate cessation of all military support for Ukraine. It was the same story at the US-Russian and US-Ukrainian talks that took place in Riyadh on 24–25 March. Russia's agreement to a ceasefire in the Black Sea was made conditional on the partial lifting of sanctions. So far, the US initiative has yielded no concrete results owing to Moscow's foot-dragging.

During its first two months in office, the Trump administration has created an asymmetric negotiating structure. It has engaged in shuttle diplomacy between Russia and Ukraine that has included delegations meeting in Saudi Arabia and phone calls with Zelensky and Putin. A similar triangular constellation led to the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2022 – an agreement that, albeit barely at times, until

Russia unilaterally terminated it in July 2023. However, the mediators at the time, Turkey and the United Nations, took a much more even-handed approach than the Trump administration is doing today.

The change in the American position means that Russian demands are now being communicated to Ukraine via Washington. Moscow is able to hope that Trump will push through some of Russia's war aims against Kyiv. If not, Putin can ensure the negotiations fail owing to his maximalist demands and can then blame Ukraine and continue the war. There is a high probability that the Trump administration will go along with any accusations made against Kyiv. As things stand right now, there are two main possible outcomes: the talks could result in a bad deal for Ukraine or they could fail altogether. In either case, the war is likely to continue, especially if the US administration sticks to its timetable and tries to force a deal by the end of April (i.e., three months after Trump took office).

## **2022–2024: War and negotiations**

The developments described above were neither predetermined nor inevitable. There was just one relatively short period at the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022 in which Ukraine was overpowered and in danger of having to accept a peace imposed by Russia. However, by autumn 2022 the Ukrainian armed forces had been able to shift the military balance in their favour. Arms supplies from the international coalition of support, formed in April of that year, played a key role in this success. Direct ceasefire talks at the start of the full-scale invasion ended inconclusively, as Ukraine's military position was strong enough from April onwards to reject Russian demands to surrender. In September 2022, further bilateral negotiations were blocked once and for all. At that time, Russia annexed the partly occupied Ukrainian territories of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson and rejected any future negotiations about their status. Presi-

dent Zelensky responded with a decree prohibiting direct talks with the Russian ruler.

Thereafter, any direct contacts between the two warring parties were limited to humanitarian issues. More than sixty exchanges of prisoners of war have taken place since the start of the full-scale invasion, as a result of which several thousand Ukrainian and Russian soldiers were released from captivity. But the figure for the return of Ukrainian children abducted to Russia is much lower. The wife of the Ukrainian president, Olena Zelenska, said in February 2025 that of the nearly 20,000 abducted children, only about 1,300 had been returned to Ukraine to date.

Since 2023, phases of positional and attritional war have alternated with mutual offensives. Both sides have suffered heavy casualties, with neither able to clearly assert itself on the battlefield. The second Ukrainian counteroffensive of 2023 did not result in any significant territorial gains. From early 2024 onwards, the military balance has slowly shifted in Russia's favour. The Ukrainian invasion of the Kursk region in August did nothing to change that. Nevertheless, the Russian armed forces are still far from winning the war militarily or even taking full control of even those territories that Moscow illegally claims to be Russian.

In the race for international support between the warring parties that accompanied the military stalemate, Russia expanded its relations with China, North Korea and Iran. Indeed, the "unlimited partnership" with Beijing has become the main pillar of Russian foreign policy. For its part, China does not officially recognise any of Russia's territorial annexations; and in the early stages of the full-scale invasion, it warned Moscow against nuclear escalation. However, the People's Republic has refrained from condemning the war of aggression and has repeatedly supported Russia at the United Nations. China has also become Russia's most important trading partner by far: among other things, it supplies dual-use goods to the Russian military-industrial complex. Iran and North Korea have become important defence suppliers, too.

North Korean soldiers have been fighting on the Russian side since 2024. Tehran and Pyongyang consistently vote with Moscow at the United Nations. Moscow signed new partnership agreements with both states in 2024–25; and it cannot be ruled out that Russia will supply them with sanctioned military and nuclear technology.

Russian diplomacy is also working hard to win over the countries of the Global South. To this end, Moscow's propaganda has framed the war against Ukraine as an anti-colonial narrative – an approach that has resonated in Africa, Latin America and Asia, fuelling scepticism on those continents towards Ukraine. And the international polarisation that followed the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October and the start of the Gaza war significantly reinforced such scepticism.

The third area of Russian war diplomacy is promoting multilateral formats in which there is very limited or no Western participation. The BRICS group stands out among those groups. Its members include Brazil, India, China and South Africa, all key international players that claim a "neutral" stance on Russia's war against Ukraine. In 2024, Moscow used its BRICS chairmanship to demonstrate just how well connected it is in the "post-Western" world.

For its part, Ukraine has pursued a diplomatic process based on the formula of "a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine". In a ten-point plan presented in 2022, it demanded, among other things, the withdrawal of all Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, the return of all Ukrainian prisoners of war and deported civilians, the prosecution of war crimes, reparations and nuclear, environmental and food security. Like Russia, Ukraine has sought to engage with medium-sized powers such as India, South Africa and Brazil, as well as the countries of the Global South. The high point and culmination of the peace formula process was the "Summit for Peace in Ukraine", which, hosted by Kyiv and Bern, took place at the Bürgenstock resort near Lucerne, Switzerland on 15–16 June 2024. It brought together no

fewer than 92 countries and eight international organisations.

Switzerland and Ukraine had to overcome considerable hurdles during the preparations for the summit. Governments in the Global South viewed the absence of Russia from the meeting as a glaring omission and regarded the peace formula as Ukraine's maximalist position, which they were not prepared to fully endorse. At the end of May, China and Brazil presented a new peace plan in a bid to divert international attention from the upcoming summit in Switzerland. Russia conducted its own counter-diplomacy. The day before the summit, Putin gave a speech at the Foreign Ministry in Moscow in which he reiterated Russia's war aims and sharply criticised the Bürgenstock Summit.

In the end, Ukraine and Switzerland failed to secure the high-level participation of key countries such as Brazil, Indonesia and South Africa, while China stayed away from the summit altogether. Of the ten points of the peace formula, only nuclear safety, food security, freedom of navigation and humanitarian issues were included in the joint communiqué, which Brazil, India, South Africa and Saudi Arabia, among others, opted not to sign. After the summit, the Peace Formula process lost momentum.

## Enter Trump

This also had to do with the shadow cast by the approaching US presidential election. In the run-up to the ballot, Republican criticism of the Biden administration's Ukraine policy grew louder and louder. Between autumn 2023 and April 2024, the Republicans blocked the passage of an important military aid package for Ukraine in the US Congress. As Trump's return to the White House looked increasingly likely, the international coordinates of Russia's war against Ukraine began to shift.

In Ukraine, the Biden administration was increasingly criticised in 2024 for being too timid towards Russia. This was also true of Kamala Harris, the vice-president and later

Democratic presidential candidate. The possibility of Trump winning the elections was viewed with trepidation in Ukraine, but it also raised hopes that he would act more decisively than Biden.

From August 2024 onwards, the Ukrainian leadership took concrete measures to prepare for the likely impending changes in the US. The incursion into the Russian region of Kursk was intended to secure leverage if Kyiv were forced to negotiate with Russia after the elections. In September and October 2024, Zelensky presented his "peace through strength" victory plan in Washington and various European capitals. The five-point plan called on Kyiv's Western backers to immediately invite Ukraine to join NATO, to jointly strengthen Ukraine's defence capabilities, to jointly develop Ukraine's deterrence potential, to jointly protect and exploit Ukraine's natural resources (including rare earths) and to use Ukraine's combat-proven units to replace American troops in Europe in the future. Kyiv intended the victory plan to complement, not replace, the peace formula, which was to remain Ukraine's fundamental legal and political stance. However, it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain that position vis-à-vis Washington.

Zelensky's victory plan was aimed at both the Biden administration and a potential new Trump administration. On the one hand, the appeal for an invitation to join NATO was founded on the unrealistic hope that President Biden would take the relevant decision between the election in early November and the inauguration of his successor in January 2025. On the other hand, the offer to jointly protect and exploit Ukraine's raw materials spoke directly to Trump's transactional political style. In September 2024, Zelensky visited an ammunition factory in Democratic-ruled Pennsylvania on the sidelines of his trip to the UN General Assembly; the MAGA camp attacked him for doing so and Trump refused to receive him. The two men did eventually meet, but the sequence of events foreshadowed the new American policy of coercion towards Ukraine.

During the election campaign, Trump's bold announcement that he would end the war within twenty-four hours, together with the increasingly open pro-Russian positions within his camp, intensified the pressure on Ukraine. Kyiv was forced to dilute some aspects of the peace formula. Zelensky and other Ukrainian officials began to suggest that a ceasefire with Russia could be achieved before all occupied Ukrainian territory had been liberated. At the same time, Zelensky signalled his openness to both direct talks with Putin and the Sino-Brazilian peace plan. However, Kyiv continued to insist on the prospect of NATO membership and security guarantees, as well as non-recognition of the Russian annexations. This overall stance reflected the mood of the Ukrainian people. In 2024, polls showed a growing number of people willing to accept a temporary loss of control over parts of Ukrainian territory if the guns fell silent. However, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian society continues to reject any peace imposed by Russia.

Moscow's position remained unchanged before and after the US election. From the Kremlin's point of view, neither the course of the war in 2024 nor what happened in the US gave it any reason to show more willingness to compromise. On the contrary, the Putin regime has been encouraged by both developments to pursue its war aims with even greater confidence – as is evident on three levels. First, Russia is sticking to its demand for Ukraine to capitulate. Second, Moscow wants to negotiate both the fate of Ukraine and the future “European security architecture” with Washington directly – i.e., excluding Ukraine and European countries. Third, the new “security architecture” should resemble another Yalta, which means the division of Europe into spheres of influence, one of which would be under Russian hegemony.

The only noticeable change on the Russian side over the past year or so has been the emergence of two new propaganda narratives. Since the spring of 2024, Moscow has repeatedly claimed that Zelensky is no longer a legitimate president (as his term

expired last May) and therefore elections in Ukraine are a prerequisite for a peace agreement. Russian officials also stress that Moscow is not interested in a ceasefire but only in “real peace”, which will require the elimination of the “root causes of the war”. According to the Russian propaganda narratives, that means regime change in Kyiv and the withdrawal of NATO from Eastern Europe. Since the autumn of 2024, both narratives have been part of the discourse of both Trump and the Republican Party – an unprecedented success scored by the Russian disinformation war.

### **The consequences of Trump's U-turn – and Europe's urgent need to act**

Russia's war against Ukraine was at an impasse for more than two years, with neither side able to achieve military victory. During this period, Western support for Ukraine was never strong enough to bring about a *mutually hurting stalemate* that would have forced Russia to make concessions.

The ongoing impasse is now being dismantled at the international level as the US takes the aggressor's side. Ukraine is caught between two fronts. If Trump gives in to Moscow's demands and withdraws military support for Ukraine, Ukraine's defence could collapse by the end of 2025. This could pave the way for Russia to win the war and dictate a hegemonic peace to Ukraine. The option of reaching a thoroughly worked out and stable ceasefire that guaranteed the existence of an independent and sovereign Ukraine would be off the table.

In such an event, the destabilisation of the country, the dissolution of the state monopoly on the use of force and the emergence of a guerrilla war in Ukraine would very likely follow. There would be another, even bigger exodus of refugees from Ukraine to Europe, especially Poland and Germany. At the same time, a Russian victory would end Ukraine's EU accession process and test the cohesion of Europe's allies to the utmost. In this new constella-

tion, both Europe and Ukraine are caught in the middle.

Furthermore, the recent developments are strengthening the Putin regime domestically. Most Russians want the war to end — only on Russian terms. Thanks to Trump’s policy, securing those terms is now within Moscow’s reach.

The situation today reveals just how schizophrenic the Russian view of the US is. After years of propaganda about the structural antagonism between Moscow and Washington, Russians now welcome a great-power deal with the US as boosting their country’s international status. Consequently, Trump is very popular in Russia, while Putin’s approval rating has nudged up to 87 per cent following the “successes” in the recent negotiations. Volodymyr Zelensky has emerged stronger, too, since the White House scandal at the end of February. But the situation remains fraught with risk for the Ukrainian government, which, unlike the dictatorial Putin regime, operates in a democratic environment. And part of that risk stems from Washington’s erratic demands for early elections in Ukraine.

Trump’s return to power has also led to peace initiatives and mediation offers from third countries grinding to a halt. The Sino-Brazilian initiative of May 2024 attracted some attention over the summer; and in September, Beijing and Brasilia announced the creation of a “Friends of Peace” platform on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, claiming that more than 100 states were interested. Since then, however, the initiative seems to have stalled — at least for the time being. The same applies to Turkey’s mediation offers and the undertakings of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who visited Moscow in July 2024 and Kyiv in August. These actors now seem to prefer to wait and see how the disruption caused by the new US administration plays out. For its part, Beijing is closely monitoring the latest developments to assess their impact on Sino-American relations.

In the new reality, Europe must adjust its interests and refocus its actions — and it must do so quickly. The asymmetric nego-

tiating structure created by the Trump administration must be corrected in Ukraine’s favour. To this end, Europe needs to pursue the following objectives. First, it must massively increase its military assistance to Ukraine, particularly in the areas of air defence, long-range weapons systems and intelligence sharing. At the very least, the Ukrainian armed forces must be in a position to be able to ensure the stable defence of the country. At the same time, Europe must build a credible deterrent against Russia as soon as possible. However, support for Ukraine should not take second place to this. Rather, the Ukrainian defence industry should be integrated into the European defence industry — to the mutual benefit of the two sides.

Second, Europe must work with Kyiv to draw up acceptable terms and conditions for a ceasefire. This will require a focus on technical details regarding military modalities and humanitarian issues as well as mechanisms for monitoring, verifying and securing the ceasefire. It will also require clearly defined red lines, such as the size of the Ukrainian armed forces, the country’s internal and external sovereignty — not least the decision when to hold elections — the non-recognition of annexations and the fundamental right to reparations and the prosecution of war crimes. There can be no sustainable ceasefire without security guarantees for Ukraine, and Europe must play a central role in their provision, including the willingness to contribute to the so-called reassurance force on Ukrainian soil. Furthermore, the EU’s military training mission (EUMAM) could be expanded and relocated to Ukraine.

Third, Europe needs to strengthen its alliances with other countries that support Ukraine and want to contain the negative global impact of Trump’s policies. Besides the UK, they include Canada, in particular, but also South Korea, Japan and Australia. At the same time, Europe and Ukraine should continue to jointly seek dialogue with countries such as Turkey, India, South Africa and Brazil, including on the possible deployment of UN peacekeepers.



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#### SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

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Fourth, Ukraine's EU accession process must be pursued with determination and, if possible, accelerated. The signal sent not only to Ukrainian society but also to Russia, must be loud and clear: Ukraine's future lies in Europe, not in a grey zone or in Russia's sphere of influence.

Fifth, Europe must continue to target Russian weaknesses. Moscow's capacity to continue the war of attrition is limited. The sanctions regime can play a central role here. It must be strengthened and expanded to raise the costs of the war for the aggressor. Trump has opened a Pandora's box through his uncritical approach towards Putin. Moscow is now sending toxic offers – not only to Washington but also to Europe – to resume economic relations. Germany is caught in the crosshairs. Such attempts to break the European consensus on sanctions must not be allowed to succeed. Given this extremely dangerous situation, measures should be taken to ensure Russia's frozen Russian can be used to support Ukraine.

Europe's goal must be to strengthen Ukraine at all levels, slow down the asymmetric negotiation process set in motion by Trump and further weaken Russia. This is the only way to create the conditions for any negotiations worthy of that name. Both Ukraine and Europe must be involved in such talks. There is a long way to go to achieve that goal.

Of late, Germany has been finding it difficult to make a significant contribution to these processes because of the political transition under way in the country. There are enormous expectations of the next German government, which will have to assume a cooperative leadership role immediately in order to avert the impending catastrophe.

*Dr Sabine Fischer is a Senior Fellow in the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division.*