



Five Years of Full-Scale War in Ukraine: New Realities and Chances for Peace

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Abstract

The war between Russia and Ukraine, which began in 2014, is still ongoing, and it is very difficult to predict when and how it will end. The Russian invasion, which began in 2022, has been going on for over 1,500 days. This study analyses the structural transformation of the geopolitical landscape and shifting international mediation dynamics as the Ukraine conflict enters its fifth year of full-scale war.

The paper examines two critical external variables driving the current dynamic. First, it analyses the dual role of the United States, which has transitioned from an external supporter into an active, structural stakeholder whose domestic political fluctuations directly dictate the frontline's operational boundaries, thereby disqualifying Washington as a neutral mediator in the eyes of the Kremlin. Second, the study evaluates China's strategy of constructive ambiguity; Beijing leverages its economic and technological lifeline to Moscow while simultaneously marketing non-Western peace proposals—co-authored with Global South actors—to project an alternative global governance model.

It evaluates two potential pathways, a "Korean Peninsula Model" of de facto partition and an "Armed Neutrality" of a non-NATO, Western-secured fortress. Moreover, this essay concludes that lasting peace requires a new global security architecture beyond a simple ceasefire line.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war, Putin, Russian aggression, political stalemate, U.S. Foreign Policy, China Mediation, Security Architecture

Introduction

Thousands of Ukrainian military and innocent people have died in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which is widely acknowledged to be the largest in Europe since the end of World War II in 1945. The world is significantly more intricate than leaders realized, as this war is now proving. Nobody is certain when or how the conflict will end, yet it is still going on. It should be recalled, nevertheless, that the Russo-Ukrainian War began on February 20, 2014, nearly eight years earlier, when Russian Federation President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin decided to invade Crimea and occupy the Donbas.

The escalation that began in February 2022 has transformed from an expected short-term crisis into a brutal war of attrition. Over these five years, the conflict has shattered the European security architecture and forced both sides to adapt to heavy human, economic, and military losses. What began as a fluid battlefield has solidified into deeply entrenched positions, fundamentally shifting the geopolitical landscape of the entire continent.

The authors of the study conclude that five years of full-scale war have replaced the old diplomatic framework with rigid new realities on the ground, making traditional military victory unlikely for either side. Consequently, the chances of sustainable peace no longer depend on simple battlefield outcomes. Instead, they are based on a complex balancing act between changing global leadership, European strategic independence, and the challenges of bridging seemingly irreconcilable national red lines.

The study analyses the current military situation of the warring parties, the operational and tactical situation on the battlefield, the current state of peace negotiations, and possible scenarios.

Methods

This study uses a mixed-methods research design that is structured to systematically analyse the structural shifts of the five-year protracted war in Ukraine and evaluate the current prerequisites for peace. To establish a rigorous theoretical foundation, the study utilizes International Relations (IR) frameworks, primarily neo-realist balance-of-power models, to examine systemic attrition, alongside conflict resolution theories, such as the concept of a mutually hurting stalemate. The core architecture of the study relies on a chronological periodization of the five-year timeline, which allows for a direct comparison between the fluid dynamics of the early invasion and the deeply institutionalized, rigid realities of year five.

The essay's methodology focuses on documenting the tangible, measurable dimensions of the conflict. Territorial shifts and frontline volatility are evaluated through geospatial (GIS) analysis and open-source intelligence (OSINT) data compiled by reputable monitoring bodies like the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). Economic attrition is measured through longitudinal macroeconomic indicators—specifically GDP contraction, inflation rates, sovereign debt, domestic defence spending, and foreign financial and military aid volumes—sourced from the World Bank, the IMF, and the Kiel Institute. The humanitarian and demographic crises are quantified using verified refugee and casualty databases from the UNHCR. Finally, shifts in societal resilience and political will are tracked via secondary analysis of public opinion polls from institutions like the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), focusing specifically on changing domestic definitions of victory and willingness to compromise.

I. The Milestone of Five Years

The passage of five years since the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 marks a profound and sober milestone in modern European history, transforming what was envisioned as a brief geopolitical shock into the most sustained and destructive conventional conflict on the continent since World War II. Reaching the half-decade threshold fundamentally alters the analytical framework of the war, shifting it from a series of temporary crises into a permanent structural reality for international relations.

This milestone underscores a sobering historical truth: the initial systemic shocks to global energy, food security, and diplomatic alignments have codified into a new, fractured status quo. What began as a desperate Ukrainian defence against a multi-axis decapitation strike has endured through five gruelling years, demonstrating that the conflict is no longer a localized border dispute but a systemic war defining the boundaries of global order. The five-year mark serves as a critical vantage point from which to evaluate how a localized escalation solidified into a generational war, deeply reshaping the collective psyche and strategic doctrines of both the Euro-Atlantic alliance and the revisionist powers. Beyond the shifting geopolitical architecture, the true weight of this five-year milestone is measured in its staggering human and material devastation, which has inflicted deep, generational trauma upon the Ukrainian state.

According to figures compiled by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Bank, the conflict has triggered the largest displacement crisis in Europe since the mid-20th century, forcing over 6.5 million Ukrainians to seek refuge across Europe, while leaving an estimated 3.7 million internally displaced within their own

ruined borders. (UNHCR, 2026). The physical landscape of the country bears the indelible scars of half a decade of unceasing bombardment, with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) estimating direct infrastructural damages to housing, healthcare, and educational facilities to be well in excess of \$195 billion. (KSE, 2025). Entire urban centres across the Donbas have been reduced to demographic and architectural voids, turning vibrant industrial hubs into uninhabitable ruins.

As the war crosses this threshold, the cumulative toll on Ukraine's human capital, characterized by a severely disrupted labour market, a profound mental health crisis among civilian populations, and an entire generation of children raised in bomb shelters, represents a long-term developmental deficit that will take decades to remediate, regardless of when the guns finally fall silent.

The Shift from Blitzkrieg to Attrition

The geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe was fundamentally rewritten when Russia launched its multi-axis invasion of Ukraine, an operation initially conceived under the doctrine of a classic *Blitzkrieg*. The strategic calculations of the Kremlin anticipated a high-speed, decisive assault capable of capturing Kyiv within days, decapitating the government of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and installing a pro-Moscow puppet regime before the international community could coordinate a meaningful response. The strategic calculations of the Kremlin anticipated a high-speed, decisive assault, mobilizing the 150,000–190,000 soldiers deployed at the borders, which represented 15–19% of the active force. (Taylor, C., 2022).

Since a significant part of the total force performed administrative, logistical, or support tasks, this contingent covered the vast majority of the actually combat-capable, immediately deployable ground and elite units. This force consisted mainly of professional contract soldiers (*serzavikov*) and elite paratroopers, having a task to capture Kyiv within days, and other important cities, in order to decapitate the government of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and install a pro-Moscow puppet regime before the international community could coordinate a meaningful response. However, this initial phase exposed severe structural vulnerabilities within the Russian military apparatus.

Systemic intelligence failures, rigid top-down command structures, and catastrophic logistical mismanagement, most vividly illustrated by the infamous 60-kilometer military convoy that stalled outside the capital, collided with a fiercely resilient Ukrainian population. Utilizing highly mobile, decentralized small-unit tactics and armed with Western man-portable anti-tank weapons, Ukrainian forces successfully disrupted Russian

supply lines, forcing a complete tactical retreat from northern Ukraine by April 2022. (Press, C., Libet, S., 2023).

This defeat marked the definitive end of the short-war illusion and set the stage for a dramatic strategic pivot. As the prospects for a swift political or military coup vanished, the conflict transitioned into a brutal, protracted war of attrition. In this modern attritional paradigm, the primary strategic objective shifted from rapid territorial conquest to the systematic grinding down of the enemy's human, material, and economic resources.

The frontlines in the Donbas and southern Ukraine quickly petrified, increasingly mimicking the static, industrialized horrors of World War I. Deep trench networks, vast minefields, and heavily fortified defensive positions, such as the Russian Surovikin Line, rendered conventional mechanized manoeuvres incredibly costly and ineffective.

The pace of the Russian advance in Ukraine is extremely slow due to intense attrition warfare and heavily fortified defensive lines. Offensive operations typically yield daily gains of only a few dozen to a few hundred meters along dynamically shifting frontlines. Ukraine is currently recognized as the most heavily mined country in the world, with approximately 139,000 square kilometres, nearly 23% of its total territory, classified as potentially contaminated by landmines and unexploded ordnance. Despite the presence of over 4,000 explosive ordnance disposal experts working in Ukraine, this vast danger area, which exceeds the entire land area of countries such as Greece or England, contains millions of hidden explosives scattered across farmland, forests, and abandoned residential areas. (UNDP, 2024)

The crisis intensified dramatically during the 2022 invasion, particularly when Russian forces established deep, multi-layered defensive networks like the "Surovikin Line" in southern and eastern Ukraine to halt Ukrainian counteroffensives. These fortifications feature dense clusters of both anti-tank and anti-personnel mines, often tightly packed together and reinforced with tripwires and booby traps. The regions suffering from the highest concentration of contamination include Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, directly threatening the lives of millions of civilians and severely crippling the country's vital agricultural sector. Despite the ongoing conflict, humanitarian organizations like "The HALO Trust", alongside Ukrainian state emergency services, have made notable progress, clearing and returning over 41,000 square kilometres of land to local communities. However, international experts warn that the remaining contamination poses a generational challenge. Even if the fighting were to stop immediately, fully surveying, clearing, and securing Ukrainian soil will require specialized equipment, tens of billions of dollars in funding, and up to 30 to 50 years of continuous demining efforts.

Regardless of assertions of battlefield progress in Ukraine, the evidence indicates that Russia is incurring an immense cost for slight advancements and is diminishing as a significant power. Since February 2022, Russian troops have experienced close to 1.2 million casualties, exceeding the losses of any major nation in any conflict since WWII. (CSIS, 2026). At present rates, total casualties for both Russian and Ukrainian forces may hit 2 million by the spring of 2026. Following the gains made in 2024, Russian troops have advanced at an average pace of 15 to 70 meters per day in their key offensives, a speed slower than nearly any significant offensive operation in any conflict over the past hundred years. (Jones, S. G., McCabe, R., 2026.) Simultaneously, Russia's wartime economy is facing mounting strain, as evidenced by a decline in manufacturing, a projected 0.6 percent growth rate for 2025, and the absence of tech firms capable of competing globally to boost long-term productivity. (Chotimah, C., 2026)

Meanwhile, the theatre of war extended far beyond the immediate trenches through strategic deep strikes. Strategic, operational, and tactical depths increased drastically compared to what was previously customary. The use of manpower in small groups became typical on both sides. Russia initiated a relentless campaign utilizing long-range missiles and kamikaze drones to cripple Ukraine's civilian energy infrastructure, aiming to break domestic morale. In response, Ukraine weaponized its own long-range drone technology to strike vital oil refineries and military supply hubs deep inside Russian territory, turning the conflict into a dual test of frontline resilience and domestic endurance. These strikes are aimed, on the Russian side, at changing the pro-government attitude of the Ukrainian population, while on the Ukrainian side, at draining Russian revenues, i.e., the sources of financing the war.

By entering its fifth year, the conflict has fundamentally become a war of factories rather than a war of generals, where military genius is secondary to industrial capacity and supply chain logistics. Russia successfully transitioned to a mobilized war economy, dedicating a massive share of its GDP to defence and effectively circumventing Western sanctions through clandestine trade networks. It is not known exactly what percentage of Russian GDP Putin spends on financing the war, because there is no transparent budget; we can only rely on intelligence data, and these provide different data. For example, according to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia's defence budget reaches 7.5% of GDP. This is more than three times the global average of 2.5%. (Jones, S., G., McCabe, R., 2026.) However, according to the German Federal Intelligence Service (BND) and other Western analysts, including hidden costs, the Kremlin actually spends nearly half of all state spending on maintaining the war machine and capabilities on NATO's eastern flank.

(Kutieliève, I., Protz, A. 2026). Furthermore, Moscow secured critical ammunition and drone transfers from external partners like North Korea and Iran, stabilizing its frontline requirements. How is Russia able to do it?

Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia's arms import structure underwent a radical transformation, shifting from a historically self-sufficient global exporter to a net importer of critical military hardware. To sustain its high ammunition consumption and bypass heavy Western sanctions, Moscow established an alternative military supply network primarily reliant on a few strategic, non-Western partners. North Korea has emerged as Russia's largest quantitative supplier, providing millions of 152mm and 122mm artillery shells, anti-tank missiles, and Hwasong-11 (KN-23/24) short-range ballistic missiles used directly against Ukrainian infrastructure, i.e., civilian targets (B., M., Snegovaya, M., Dolbaia, T., Fenton, N., 2024.) Even more, North Korea sent around 11000 troops to the frontline in Kursk Oblast, and already 6000 have been injured or killed. (South China Morning Post, 2026). Concurrently, Iran has served as the backbone for Russia's unmanned aerial capabilities by supplying thousands of Shahed-131 and Shahed-136 kamikaze drones. This partnership expanded into a joint venture, enabling Russia to build its own domestic Shahed assembly facility within the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in Tatarstan. (Albright, D., Faragasso, S., 2024). Iran has also supplemented the Russian inventory with short-range ballistic missiles, such as the Fath-360.

While China has officially maintained a policy of not providing lethal military aid, it plays a vital role by supplying massive volumes of "dual-use" technologies. China acts as the primary economic and industrial lifeline for Russia's military capacity, despite maintaining official diplomatic neutrality regarding the conflict in Ukraine. While Beijing avoids direct shipments of fully assembled, lethal weapons systems, it continuously fuels Russia's defence sector through alternative channels. Chinese firms deliver the majority of the semiconductors, microelectronics, and high-precision CNC machine tools necessary to manufacture and repair modern Russian missiles and tanks, alongside raw chemicals like nitrocellulose for gunpowder production. (Brahya, J. 2026) Finally, to circumvent strict Western technology bans, Russia relies heavily on parallel import networks. Western-made microchips and electronics are systematically smuggled into the country through transshipment hubs in Central Asia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, allowing Russia to continuously sustain its wartime manufacturing pipeline.

Moreover, the total annual bilateral trade between China and Russia has reached an all-time high, around \$228 billion to \$245 billion, with official figures predicting \$228.1 billion in 2025 and \$244.8 billion in 2024. (BNE Intel News, 2026) This trade is currently keeping the Russian war

effort alive, but it will create a huge dependency for Russia in the medium and especially long term. (Caruso, Alessia, Rühlig, Tim, 2026.) Over 90% of these transactions bypass Western banking ecosystems entirely by settling in Yuan and Rubles. Furthermore, China has increased its purchases of Russian crude oil and natural gas. This constant cash flow directly stabilizes Moscow's state revenues against European embargoes. Russia initiated a relentless campaign utilizing long-range missiles and kamikaze drones to cripple Ukraine's civilian energy infrastructure, destroying or severely damaging between 50% and 65% of Ukraine's total power-generation capacity. (Russia Matters Staff, 2026).

In response, Ukraine weaponized its own long-range drone technology to strike vital oil refineries and military supply hubs deep inside Russian territory, turning the conflict into a dual test of frontline resilience and domestic endurance. Since February 24, 2022, Russia has occupied extra 29,083 square miles, i.e., 12% of Ukraine. (ISW, 2026) Area roughly equivalent to half the U.S. state of Illinois, as you can see on the next figure.



Figure 1: Territorial control in Ukraine as of 19 May 2026

Conversely, Ukraine's long-term sustainability remains critically dependent on Western financial and military aid. In this attritional equation, the greatest strategic threat to Kyiv is not necessarily a sudden Russian breakthrough, but rather the creeping "war fatigue" among its international allies. Political shifts, domestic budgetary debates, and depleted Western military stockpiles directly impact the volume and speed of supply deliveries, making Ukraine's frontline defences highly sensitive to the political willpower of Washington and European capitals. This enduring

stalemate is further cemented by a profound technological paradox that has created a completely "transparent battlefield."

The proliferation of mass-produced reconnaissance drones, ubiquitous commercial satellite imagery, and advanced electronic warfare systems has made the element of surprise virtually obsolete. Ukraine's ability to deny Russian breakthroughs is under increasing pressure due to recruitment difficulties and declining Western support. That is why Ukraine is increasingly using, and quite successfully, unmanned vehicles, drones, remotely controlled machine guns, etc. It is now impossible to mass armoured columns or troop concentrations without being immediately detected and targeted within minutes.

Furthermore, the widespread deployment of cheap First-Person View (FPV) kamikaze drones has revolutionized tactical defence; a \$500 civilian-grade drone can reliably neutralize a multi-million-dollar main battle tank, such as Russia's \$4.5 million T-90M. (Axe, D., 2024). This extreme cost imbalance heavily favours defensive operations over offensive ones. Consequently, as the war hits the five-year mark, these technological and logistical realities have locked both nations into a grinding equilibrium, where territorial gains are measured in meters, and the ultimate outcome depends entirely on which society can longer absorb the staggering human and material costs, with total combined military casualties already exceeding 1.8 million wounded or killed, of a total war. (CSIS, 2016) In practice, the Ukrainian army found an asymmetric response to an opponent superior in numbers and technical means.

II. The New Realities on the Ground The Frozen, Yet Active Frontline

The current military landscape in Ukraine presents a profound strategic paradox: a front line that is geographically frozen yet operationally hyperactive and lethal. After five years of intense, full-scale warfare, the conflict has largely lost its initial fluid, manoeuvre-based character. The vast territorial sweeps seen in 2022 have been replaced by a static, deeply fortified 1,000-kilometer trench system that closely resembles the Western Front of WWI. (ISW, 2023) However, underneath this structural immobility lies a high-tech, high-intensity war of attrition where hundreds of daily engagements, artillery duels, and localized assaults take place. Neither side can execute a decisive, deep-theatre breakthrough because modern surveillance has rendered the battlefield completely transparent.

This transparency is driven by the saturation of reconnaissance and strike drones, which look over every movement within kilometres of the zero-line. Any concentration of armour or infantry is instantly spotted and targeted by precision artillery, guided glide bombs, or First-Person View

(FPV) kamikaze drones, making large-scale surprise offenses mathematically and logistically impossible. As a result, the war has devolved into a grinding battle of inches. Territorial gains are now measured in meters and single tree lines rather than cities, achieved at an incredibly high cost in both manpower and material. This static brutality creates a massive strategic dilemma: while the front line barely moves on the map, the constant, heavy consumption of ammunition, equipment, and human lives exerts a relentless pressure that forces both Moscow and Kyiv to continuously hunt for fresh resources just to maintain the current equilibrium.

Domestic Fatigue

As the Russian invasion crosses the five-year mark, the psychological and social consequences are now manifesting as deep-rooted domestic political fatigue in both countries, fundamentally jeopardizing the long-term sustainability of their war efforts. In Ukraine, the initial existential adrenaline that fuelled national mobilization in 2022 has inevitably given way to a profound sense of physical and mental exhaustion. According to data from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), public willingness to endure prolonged economic hardship and personal danger indefinitely has dropped significantly. (Kyiv IIS, 2026). While the overarching commitment to national sovereignty remains, the cumulative effect of daily air raid sirens, permanent energy blackouts, and the tragic loss of loved ones has shifted the public mood. The overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian population, approximately 69%, supports an early, negotiated end to the war, and only 24% of those surveyed support continuing the fighting until complete victory. (Vigers, B., 2025.)

Recent polling indicates that around 32% to 35% of Ukrainians would now support pragmatic territorial compromises if it meant securing a verified peace and solid Western security guarantees. This represents a significant rise from the mere 8–10% recorded in the war's first year, exposing a growing rift between the political leadership's absolute war aims and a weary populace desperately longing for stability. (Holech, A., Martill, B., 2025). Synchronously, the societal fabric of the Russian Federation is showing its own deep fractures, hidden beneath a veneer of state-enforced patriotism. Despite the Kremlin's aggressive propaganda campaigns and the harsh criminalization of anti-war dissent, independent research organizations like the Levada Center have documented a massive surge in public exhaustion. Reliable polling data from 2025 and early 2026 reveal that a striking 66% of the Russian population actively supports entering immediate peace negotiations, outnumbering those who favour continuing the offensive. The Russian populace is increasingly feeling the bite of the "iranization" of their economy, driven by chronic labour shortages, high interest rates, and

the relentless pressure of a mobilization apparatus that has sustained over 300,000 casualties. (Young, T-D., Gryz, J, 2025). The societal fatigue in Russia is not characterized by open political revolt, but rather by passive resistance, a sharp decline in voluntary military enlistment, and a collective psychological withdrawal, indicating that the Kremlin's domestic mandate for an endless war of conquest is rapidly eroding.

The Human and Economic Toll

The Russia-Ukraine war has triggered catastrophic human suffering and staggering economic costs worldwide, with recent estimates citing nearly 1.2 million Russian military casualties alongside hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian casualties. (CSIS, 2016) The demographic collapse of Ukraine is one of the most severe long-term consequences of the five-year conflict. The war has violently accelerated pre-existing negative trends, creating a population deficit that will impact the country for generations.

According to data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Russian killed, wounded, and missing personnel have approached this million-plus threshold, while Ukrainian military casualties are estimated to range between 500,000 and 600,000. (Jones, S. G., McCabe, R., 2026). Beyond the front lines, the civilian toll remains devastating. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that over 42,000 Ukrainian civilians have been killed or wounded, a figure that tragically includes more than 2,500 children. This relentless violence has caused massive demographic displacement, forcing nearly a quarter of Ukraine's pre-war population to flee their homes. Currently, approximately 6.9 million Ukrainians are registered as refugees abroad, while another 3.7 million remain internally displaced within the country. (UNHCR, 2025)

Widespread infrastructure destruction and a severely stressed state budget are two indicators of the enormous financial catastrophe occurring within Ukraine. According to World Bank projections, Ukraine would need at least \$588 billion for recovery and reconstruction over the next ten years, with a major emphasis on the country's devastated transportation, housing, and energy sectors. Direct infrastructural damage has now exceeded \$176 billion, with more than 2.5 million homes, representing nearly 13% of the country's pre-war housing stock, either damaged or destroyed. With Ukraine's daily cost of war averaging over \$172 million, maintaining a wartime economy and financing national defence has resulted in an enormous daily financial load. (Maelha, Q., 2026.)

As a direct result of the protracted battle, Russia is currently experiencing serious domestic economic and demographic challenges. Over \$450 billion has been spent directly on the war by the Kremlin, adding to the pressure from widespread international sanctions and declining oil earnings.

More importantly, the conflict's losses and widespread emigration have put significant pressure on the Russian labour market. By 2030, the Russian government anticipates a shortage of 2.4 million workers, a sharp decline in the country's labour force that has already resulted in high internal inflation and pay increases. (Tefft, J., 2026).

Empirical simulations conducted by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR, 2022) indicate that the supply shock generated by the conflict significantly amplified global price instability. According to their macroeconomic model, the global inflation rate was driven upward by up to 3 percentage points in 2022, followed by an additional increase of approximately 2 percentage points in 2023, relative to the baseline scenario. (NIESR, 2022).

Ultimately, these widespread trade disruptions and skyrocketing energy costs stifled international growth, wiping roughly \$1 trillion off the global gross domestic product.

Military Stalemate and Technological Evolution

Military stalemate and technological developments in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The Russo-Ukrainian war is characterized by a strategic stalemate, driven by widespread surveillance, dense minefields, and intense electronic warfare. Russia is trying to exploit its numerical advantage, which the Ukrainians are countering with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), remote-controlled and combat-ready robots. In this regard, it has now become a continuous testing ground for autonomous and robotic warfare. At the time of writing, the United States is at war with Iran, and the manner and timing of its conclusion are questionable.

This war will, on the one hand, provide the Russians with greater oil revenues due to higher oil prices, and on the other hand, make the already declining American support even more uncertain. At the same time, the dynamics of the front line are characterized by very slow Russian gains with heavy losses and successful Ukrainian counterattacks in some places. Technological development and innovation play a major role in this situation. One of the features of the Russian-Ukrainian war has become the massive use of unmanned aerial vehicles, ground vehicles, and watercraft. Ukraine is currently leading in these developments and technological competition.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence is striving for the complete robotization of front-line logistics with the domestically developed Bizon-L and Termit logistics vehicles, as well as the machine-gunned Liut and Droid TW platforms, and is already testing humanoid Phantom MK-1 robots as foreign support. (SWJ, 2026). In contrast, Russia is relying more on the automation of existing heavy weapons and larger, tracked systems, such as

the Uran-6 mine-clearing vehicle and the Uran-9 missile-equipped vehicle. (Bendett, S., 2023). These robotic units now define the battlefield in four main areas: delivering ammunition and food to the most dangerous trenches, rescuing wounded soldiers from the line of fire, autonomously clearing or planting minefields, and conducting direct attacks with their remote-controlled weapons or kamikaze launches.

Because Ukraine's autonomous naval drones were able to drive back the Russian Black Sea Fleet and secure crucial commerce channels, this land-based robotization is also changing the fight at sea and in the air. Defence decision cycles have been significantly shortened as the sides combine ballistic missiles and drone swarms from various directions to target each other's air defences. This requirement has led to an unparalleled level of direct integration between private technology firms and armed forces, where battlefield survival is directly determined by the pace of software upgrades and robotic breakthroughs.

Geopolitical Alignment

Russia's current geopolitical alignment is fundamentally defined by its decisive pivot away from the West, a deepening strategic partnership with China, and an aggressive cultivation of economic and military ties across the Global South. Driven by unprecedented Western sanctions and international isolation following its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has comprehensively restructured its foreign policy priorities. The traditional post-Cold War framework of cautious integration with Euro-Atlantic structures has been entirely replaced by a revisionist strategy aimed at dismantling Western geopolitical hegemony and fostering a multipolar world order.

Simultaneously, Moscow has successfully leveraged multilateral platforms like BRICS+ and OPEC+ to bypass Western isolation and project global influence. By framing its struggle as a resistance against Trump-led US neo-colonialism (Kupchan, C., A., 2026). Russia has maintained vital economic ties with major neutral powers like India and China, which continue to purchase record amounts of Russian crude oil. While Belarus remains fully integrated into Moscow's military and political orbit, Russia's influence in the broader post-Soviet space is fracturing. Central Asian nations, particularly Kazakhstan, are increasingly distancing themselves from Moscow's aggressive foreign policy to pursue independent diplomatic ties with China and the European Union. (Heckenthaler, J. 2024.)

Meanwhile, Russia faces its own severe domestic economic and demographic crises as a direct result of the protracted conflict. The Kremlin's direct military expenditures have now surpassed \$450 billion, which—combined with the cumulative economic pressure exerted by extensive

international sanctions, diminishing oil revenues, and frozen state assets—imposes a severe strain on the Russian federal budget. (FCDO, 2025)

More critically, the conflict has severely strained the Russian labour market due to casualties and mass emigration. The Russian government projects a shortfall of 2.4 million workers by 2030, a drastic shrinkage of the domestic labour force that has already driven up wages and sparked high internal inflation. The consequences of the war extend far beyond the borders of the combatant nations, severely disrupting the global economy. As analysed by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, the sudden halt of Ukrainian and Russian exports of vital commodities like wheat, oil, and gas triggered a massive global supply shock. This disruption drove up global inflation by up to 3 percentage points in 2022 and an additional 2 percentage points in 2023. Ultimately, these widespread trade disruptions and skyrocketing energy costs stifled international growth, wiping roughly \$1 trillion off the global gross domestic product. (NIESR, 2026).

The Beijing-Moscow axis, which is Russia's main diplomatic and economic lifeline, is at the centre of this reconfigured foreign strategy. China actively stabilizes the Russian wartime economy by absorbing large amounts of discounted Russian oil and gas while exporting vital dual-use technologies and industrial machinery, despite its formal neutrality in the conflict. In addition to China, Russia has established a military alliance with pariah nations like North Korea and Iran that is primarily focused on transactions. In return for cutting-edge Russian military gear and aerospace know-how, Tehran gives combat drone architecture and missile technology, while Pyongyang directly sends millions of artillery shells and ballistic missiles.

The contemporary economic relationship between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China is increasingly characterized by a profound structural imbalance, positioning Moscow in a state of asymmetrical dependency on Beijing. Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent imposition of comprehensive Western sanctions, which effectively severed Russia's access to European markets, the Kremlin has come to rely on China as its primary macroeconomic lifeline. This dependency spans vital hydrocarbon revenues, consumer goods substitution, and the procurement of sanctioned technologies. Conversely, Beijing maintains significant strategic flexibility, purposefully limiting its own reliance on the Russian market while capitalizing on its enhanced geopolitical and economic leverage.

This structural asymmetry is vividly reflected in bilateral trade architectures. Total trade volume between the two nations has reached unprecedented heights, exceeding \$227 billion annually, with quarterly data showing sustained double-digit growth. However, the composition of this

trade reveals a highly uneven vulnerability; while Chinese imports now constitute over 57% of Russia's total import market—up from less than 30% before the conflict—Russia accounts for a mere 4% of China's global trade portfolio. (Essen, von H., 2026.) This disparity is equally evident in the energy sector. Having lost its traditional Western consumer base, Russia redirected its fossil fuel exports eastward, causing China's share of Russian energy exports to surge to approximately 38%. While this relationship has generated over \$370 billion in revenue for Moscow, Beijing has utilized its monopsonistic leverage to secure steep price discounts, all while deliberately diversifying its own energy matrix through alternative suppliers in the Middle East and Africa to mitigate geopolitical risk.

Beyond raw materials, China has effectively become Russia's primary technology provider, mitigating the impact of Western export controls. Chinese manufacturers now supply roughly 90% of Russia's high-tech imports, including advanced precision machine tools, semiconductors, and microelectronics vital for the maintenance of the Russian defence industrial base. (TMT, 2026). A parallel transformation has occurred in the domestic consumer sector, where the mass exit of European, Japanese, and American automakers paved the way for Chinese automotive brands to systematically capture the Russian market.

This systemic realignment extends into the financial sector, manifested in the rapid "yuan-ization" of the Russian financial ecosystem. Following Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT international payment mechanism and the freezing of its Western currency reserves, the Chinese Yuan (RMB) supplanted the US Dollar and the Euro as the most heavily traded currency on the Moscow Exchange. Nevertheless, this financial reliance has introduced new points of friction. The introduction of stringent Western secondary sanctions has forced major Chinese banking institutions to tighten compliance protocols to safeguard their access to Euro-Atlantic financial markets, frequently resulting in payment delays and logistical bottlenecks for Russian entities. Ultimately, this economic dynamic yields a deeply unequal partnership: while Beijing can afford to recalibrate, its engagement based on a cost-benefit calculus, Moscow remains structurally locked into a position of vulnerability, entirely dependent on China's continued economic cooperation.

Part II: The Elusive Chances for Peace

The diplomatic landscape surrounding the five-year mark of the conflict has been injected with unprecedented volatility, driven by shifting political leadership in both the United States and Central Europe. The return of Donald Trump to the White House introduced a highly transactional

approach to transatlantic diplomacy, with Washington exerting immense pressure on both Kyiv and Moscow to freeze the conflict.

Donald J. Trump frequently said during his presidential campaign that he would put an end to Europe's largest conflict since 1945 in a day or two. Naturally, he also had issues with the Biden administration. European experts never agreed with Trump's pledge. It was always an audacious promise to those who understood the nature of conflict. As of this writing, there is not even a ceasefire, let alone a peace deal. Since taking office, President Trump and his advisors have conceded that an agreement could take months, maybe years.

Trump believed that he could reconcile with Putin if he exerted pressure on Ukraine, the weaker party. As a businessman, he believed that politics was not business; it was just business. Mutual mistrust was the largest obstacle to coercive diplomacy in Ukraine. When the conflict is over, Putin will find it difficult to believe that the US will honour its pledges to lift sanctions or close Ukraine's borders. More significantly, as they followed the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the 2014 Minsk Agreement, which resulted in a full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine will not trust Russia's assurances that hostilities won't restart in the future. Because of this, Ukraine must maintain the highest level of security. That is why it is so important for Ukraine to secure itself with the strongest possible security guarantees against a Russian retreat.

However, the Trump administration's push for a rapid resolution, exemplified by several rounds of high-level gridlock at the Geneva summits, has consistently collided with the war's structural complexity. Moreover, Trump is not known for his caution. He is also unpredictable and raises accountability issues. His plan, originally 28 points, later revised to 19 points, was not accepted by either Ukraine or Russia. Peace talks aimed at ending the Russian-Ukrainian war are currently at a sensitive, transitional, and tense stage, as developments on the battlefield and the rigid positions of the parties have led to a lack of substantive progress.

Although a brief, three-day humanitarian ceasefire and a significant prisoner exchange were brokered in early May by US President Donald Trump, the process of a comprehensive political settlement has stalled. The diplomatic deadlock in the Russia-Ukraine peace talks is driven by "incompatible red lines," where the minimum security and political requirements of one side represent a total capitulation or a surrender of state sovereignty for the other. This structural irresolvability rests primarily on two pillars: territorial claims versus territorial integrity, and the dilemma of security guarantees versus neutrality.

Regarding geographical borders, the positions of the two sides are mathematically and politically mutually exclusive. Moscow's red line

demands full recognition of its sovereignty over the Ukrainian territories it has constitutionally annexed, which means freezing the current front lines. For Vladimir Putin, relinquishing these lands would be a domestic sign of weakness that would directly undermine his regime's legitimacy. Conversely, Kyiv's red line is rooted in international law, demanding the preservation of its 1991 recognized borders. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the majority of Ukrainian society believe that any territorial concession would legitimize violent border changes and encourage future Russian aggression. (Detmer, J., 2025). There is no middle ground in this equation, as a specific city or region can only belong to one sovereign power, making any compromise on this front impossible.

The question of security guarantees is equally irreconcilable, as both nations define their future security in completely opposite terms. Ukraine views past paper-based promises, like the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, as completely ineffective. Consequently, Kyiv insists that the only real guarantee against future Russian aggression is NATO's Article 5 or an equivalent, heavily armed Western military alliance. On the other side, Moscow views Ukraine's potential NATO integration or any Western military infrastructure on its borders as an existential threat. Putin's non-negotiable demand is absolute Ukrainian neutrality, which involves radical demilitarization, troop caps, and removing Euro-Atlantic integration from the Ukrainian constitution. What Russia considers a necessary security buffer zone is seen by Ukraine as a state of total vulnerability. If Ukraine remains neutral without external military guarantees, Moscow could resume the war at any time, but if Ukraine receives those Western guarantees, Russia considers the main objective of its invasion a failure.

This clash of fundamental interests explains why Donald Trump's 28-point peace draft stalled. The U.S. mediation team attempted to bridge the chasm by asking both sides to abandon their core red lines simultaneously. The plan required Ukraine to give up its NATO ambitions and accept the current front lines, while asking Russia to accept a neutral Ukraine backed by a massive Western trigger mechanism that would reactivate global sanctions and military retaliation if Moscow ever attacked again. Because Kyiv refuses to trust guarantees outside of NATO, and Moscow rejects any form of Western military oversight in Ukraine, the collision of these incompatible red lines has completely paralyzed the diplomatic process. (Cancian, M., F., Snegovaya, M., 2025.)

This geopolitical equation was further transformed by the historic April 12 elections in Hungary, which fundamentally dismantled the Kremlin's long-standing diplomatic strategy within the European Union. The defeat of Viktor Orbán's administration and the ascension of Péter Magyar's government deprived Vladimir Putin of his primary veto-wielding ally in

Brussels. (Kolyandr, A., 2026.) For years, Moscow relied on Budapest to delay EU sanction packages and block critical financial aid to Ukraine. The political shift on April 12 closed this institutional loophole, granting Western Europe a unified front and providing Ukraine with renewed strategic momentum for its accelerated EU integration process.

Despite Hungary's new government establishing a predictable, pro-Western stance that explicitly respects Ukrainian sovereignty, the broader prospects for a comprehensive peace treaty remain deeply elusive due to inherently incompatible red lines. Vladimir Putin continues to demand the permanent international recognition of Russia's annexed oblasts and a legally binding guarantee that Ukraine will never join NATO. (Lieven, A., Episkopos, M., 2026). Conversely, President Zelenskyy and a revitalized European coalition argue that any ceasefire without ironclad, Western-backed military guarantees would merely offer Moscow a tactical pause to rearm for a future invasion. Global forecasting venues mirror this diplomatic stalemate; throughout early 2026, international prediction markets like Polymarket consistently priced the probability of a formal, negotiated ceasefire by the end of the year at a sceptical 25% to 26%. (Polymarket, 2025).

Furthermore, while Europe's political architecture became more cohesive after April 12, pragmatism dictates that the region cannot entirely decouple overnight, as reflected in interviews indicating that the EU will likely maintain structured, defensive energy strategies regarding Russian gas dependencies for years to come. Consequently, as the conflict endures, the most statistically probable trajectory is not a comprehensive, just peace, but rather a slow drift toward a "frozen conflict" or a de facto Korean-style armistice. The new regional realities of 2026 have proven that while external political shocks, such as changing administrations in Washington or a historic government transition in Budapest, can successfully alter the balance of diplomatic isolation and economic aid, they cannot easily dissolve the existential core of the war. Five years of industrialized slaughter have locked both combatants into a zero-sum struggle where the political survival of both regimes is tied to the frontline. Until the industrial capacity of the West or the economic endurance of the Russian state reaches a definitive breaking point, the chances for a lasting peace will remain a secondary concern to the brutal mathematics of sustainable attrition.

The military, economies, and societies of both Russia and Ukraine are clearly suffering as a result of the conflict. Although both sides are already exhibiting indications of exhaustion, they have not yet given up on their objectives. Significant human casualties, economic stagnation, and a workforce shortage are all problems facing Russia. As demonstrated by the assassination of Alexei Navalny, Putin frequently clamps down on possible

challengers, killing people who oppose him and those who seek change. The demise of Yevgeny Prigozhin underscored the Kremlin's zero-tolerance policy toward domestic dissent, reinforcing Vladimir Putin's internal authority. (Stanovaya, 2023). Furthermore, intelligence assessments suggest that Putin faces minimal short-term pressure to halt the conflict, largely due to an isolated decision-making structure that insulates the leadership from unfavourable battlefield realities. (Hill, F., Stent, A., 2024). What are the potential outcomes of the conflict, then?

III. The Political and Diplomatic Stalemate

The political and diplomatic stalemate in the Russia-Ukraine war is defined by "incompatible red lines," where the survival requirements of each nation demand the total capitulation of the other, eliminating the possibility of a middle-ground compromise. This deadlock is rooted in two core issues: Russia's demand for recognized sovereignty over annexed Ukrainian regions versus Ukraine's refusal to concede territory, and Ukraine's insistence on NATO membership for security against Russia's demand for a neutral, demilitarized Ukraine.

The Sovereignty versus Annexation Dilemma

The question of borders and sovereignty represents the most intractable structural contradiction of the conflict, as the legal, constitutional, and political positions of both nations are mathematically and politically mutually exclusive. (Soltys, D., 2023). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has precipitated a fundamental norm-shattering crisis within contemporary international law, positioning the bedrock principle of state sovereignty and territorial integrity in direct opposition to the geopolitical reality of unilateral annexation. This systemic dilemma challenges the efficacy and survival of the post-World War II liberal international order, which is anchored in Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, a framework that strictly prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial boundaries of any sovereign state. (UN, 1945).

Moscow's revisionist strategy, manifested in the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent 2022 incorporation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions, seeks to institutionalize territorial aggrandizement through coerced pseudo-referendums and a manipulated interpretation of the right to self-determination.

Consequently, the international community faces a profound jurisprudential and diplomatic deadlock regarding resolution pathways. On one hand, the normative framework demands an absolute adherence to *jus cogens* norms, stipulating that territorial acquisitions achieved through unlawful aggression cannot be legally recognized (*ex injuria jus non oritur*).

On the other hand, *realpolitik* and the humanitarian imperative to halt protracted attrition warfare exert immense pressure on diplomatic channels to consider pragmatic concessions. Legal scholars argue that codifying any formula that trades Ukrainian territory for a cessation of hostilities risks establishing a highly destabilizing global precedent. (Schmitt, M., N. 2023.) Such a compromise would functionally erode the normative taboo against territorial conquest, signalling to other revisionist powers that military force remains a viable mechanism for altering internationally recognized borders. Ultimately, the sovereignty-annexation dilemma represents more than a localized border dispute; it is a critical test of whether the global security architecture can enforce its foundational rules or whether it will revert to an anarchic system governed by the doctrine of "might makes right."

The Security Conundrum

The dispute over Ukraine's future alignment is a core element of the political stalemate, as both nations define their national survival in completely opposite terms. From Ukraine's perspective, neutrality is an existential threat. Kyiv views any demand for absolute neutrality not as a diplomatic compromise, but as a roadmap to state elimination. This deep distrust is rooted in the historical failure of paper-based security assurances, most notably the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. (UN, 1994). Under that agreement, Ukraine surrendered the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal in exchange for explicit promises from Russia, the US, and the UK to respect its sovereignty and existing borders. (Obe, J., S. 2026).

The subsequent Russian invasions of 2014 and 2022 proved to the Ukrainian public that non-binding political declarations offer zero protection against an expansionist neighbour. Consequently, Kyiv insists that a neutral, disarmed Ukraine would simply be a defenceless target for a future Russian assault. For Ukraine, the only credible deterrent against a third war is full NATO membership and the protection of its Article 5 collective defence clause, or a legally binding, heavily armed bilateral military alliance with Western powers.

From Moscow's strategic viewpoint, Ukraine's integration into the Western military alliance is an absolute, non-negotiable red line. The Kremlin views the eastward expansion of NATO not as a defensive measure, but as an offensive encirclement designed to project American military infrastructure directly onto Russia's vulnerable southwestern border. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly stated that a highly militarized Ukraine aligned with the West poses an unacceptable threat to Russia's geopolitical survival. Moscow's core war aim remains the permanent neutralization of Ukraine, demanding that Kyiv formally strip Euro-Atlantic integration from

its constitution, implement strict caps on its standing army, and ban foreign troops or NATO weapons systems from its soil. (Mills, C., 2026).

This creates an absolute deadlock: what Russia considers a vital and necessary "security buffer zone" (a disarmed, neutral Ukraine), Ukraine recognizes as a state of total, fatal vulnerability. If Ukraine yields to neutrality without ironclad external defence mechanisms, it risks future invasion; yet, if the West grants Ukraine those very guarantees, Russia considers its primary strategic objective defeated, ensuring that neither side is willing to blink first at the negotiating table.

Domestic Political Constraints

Both Kyiv and Moscow operate under intense domestic pressures that severely limit their room for diplomatic manoeuvring, transforming the peace process into a high-stakes survival gamble for both leaderships. One of Zelensky's biggest challenges is maintaining the morale of the Ukrainian population without a peace treaty that looks like capitulation. For Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the political constraints are defined by the democratic nature of his state and the immense sacrifices of his people. After years of national mobilization, devastating infrastructure loss, and hundreds of thousands of casualties, any peace deal that involves formal territorial concessions or a permanent ban on NATO integration could be perceived domestically as a national capitulation. Zelenskyy must balance immense international diplomatic pressure to compromise against the mood of a Ukrainian society and a highly motivated military that views compromised peace terms as an insult to those who died.

Accepting a flawed deal risks triggering severe domestic political instability, fracturing the national consensus, or even facing a backlash from hardline domestic factions. Consequently, Zelenskyy's rhetoric must continuously project absolute victory and legal justice to prevent a collapse of public morale.

On the Russian side, Vladimir Putin faces the limitations of an autocratic regime, having staked his entire domestic legitimacy on the outcome of this war. Having transformed Russia into a full-fledged war economy and sacrificed vast human lives and financial resources, Putin cannot afford an ambiguous ending. To ensure the survival of his regime and its historical legacy, he must reach a final settlement that the Russian public can present as a historic triumph, a great victory over the West.

This means that Moscow must extract tangible, lasting benefits from the negotiating table, such as the explicit annexation of Ukrainian regions and a formal halt to NATO expansion. (Westra, L., 2025.) Putin's grievance stretches back to the time before the reunification of Germany. In 1990, Western officials and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev were investigating

how NATO could support a united Germany without disturbing the European order.

Since then, Moscow has maintained that NATO will not move eastward, as the West had promised. This assertion was unsupported at the time by any official treaty or instrument, and in reality, no formal, legally binding agreement was ever struck to halt NATO's expansion. Anything less could be interpreted by Russia's nationalist elite and those who profit from the military budget as a failure that could undermine the Kremlin's absolute power.

IV. The U.S. Factor and Changing International Mediation

As the full-scale war in Ukraine enters its fifth year, the geopolitical environment surrounding the conflict has undergone a profound structural transformation, moving far beyond a localized regional crisis into a highly complex, protracted, proxy confrontation. The United States plays a central role in this evolution. While the Biden administration successfully mobilized transatlantic allies in support of Kyiv, the subsequent shift in U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump introduced a transactional approach, emphasizing a negotiated settlement that critics argue disproportionately favours Moscow's territorial and security demands.

This severe polarization has accelerated the systemic collapse of post-Cold War multilateral frameworks. Institutional arenas like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) have proven entirely gridlocked, stripped of their mediating capacity by reciprocal vetoes and a total degradation of diplomatic trust.

Consequently, this war marks a significant paradigm shift from Western-led conflict resolution to decentralized, alternative international mediation channels. As the traditional Euro-Atlantic consensus has reached a strategic impasse, a clear regionalization of diplomacy has emerged, with the vacuum left by Washington and Brussels increasingly being filled by rising central powers and actors from the global South. This structural transition was clearly demonstrated by the peace talks in Istanbul in May 2025, hosted by Turkey, which allowed for direct, multi-level diplomatic contacts between Russian, Ukrainian, and American delegations. This was further reinforced by subsequent official contacts in Abu Dhabi (UAE), which signalled a shift toward highly fragmented, transactional diplomacy. At the same time, neither a lasting ceasefire nor peace brokered by these states has been achieved. China is now in a position with which Russia can credibly negotiate.

However, China's potential as a genuine peacemaker faces severe structural limitations, primarily rooted in a profound crisis of credibility

among Western stakeholders. Washington and Brussels largely view Beijing's peace initiatives not as a neutral diplomatic endeavour, but as a strategic smokescreen designed to freeze the conflict on terms favourable to Moscow and lock in Russian territorial gains. For Ukraine, any Chinese-led mediation remains a deeply calculated risk; while Kyiv recognizes that Beijing's participation is essential to pressure Russia, it remains highly sceptical of any peace formula that does not include the complete withdrawal of Russian forces to its internationally recognized borders. Ultimately, China's role as a potential peacemaker in the fifth year of the war is not defined by traditional, impartial mediation, but by power politics. Beijing does not seek a peace based on Western liberal norms, but rather a managed stabilization of the conflict that prevents a total Russian collapse, limits Transatlantic overreach, and firmly establishes China as an indispensable, permanent manager of European and global security.

V. Strategic Options: What Could a Solution Look Like?

Various think-tank centres have outlined several ideas as scenarios for the conclusion of the war. The study rules out any significant changes on the front line in 2026 that would radically affect the conclusion of the war. The authors of this essay see the following scenarios as currently realistic.

Scenario A: The Korean Peninsula Model (De Facto Partition)

This scenario covers a model that is a practically „no war-no peace” situation. As the war enters its fifth year with deeply entrenched frontlines and mutual strategic exhaustion, the "Korean Peninsula Model" has shifted from a theoretical historical analogy into a highly plausible geopolitical reality. This scenario is predicated on a *de facto* partition of Ukraine, characterized by an unsigned armistice, the establishment of a heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the prevailing lines of contact, and a long-term freezing of the conflict without any formal or legal territorial concessions by Kyiv. Under this matrix, neither Ukraine nor the international community officially recognizes Russian sovereignty over occupied territories, yet both sides acknowledge the operational impossibility of altering the borders through military means in the short-to-medium term.

Ultimately, while Scenario A offers a pragmatic mechanism to halt the immediate loss of life and stabilize global energy and grain markets, it codifies a highly volatile status quo. It transforms the Ukrainian soil into a permanent, militarized fault line of the 21st century, ensuring that while an unstable peace is achieved, the underlying systemic rivalry between Russia and the Transatlantic alliance remains fundamentally unresolved.

Scenario B: Armed Neutrality

This scenario is based on the idea that Ukraine is a strongly fortified, but non-NATO sovereign state. In this framework, Kyiv formally agrees to accept a non-aligned, non-NATO strategic status to mitigate Russia's primary geopolitical *casus belli*. In return, Ukraine does not rely on fragile diplomatic promises; instead, it receives legally binding, long-term bilateral security frameworks and advanced military commitments from a coalition of Western powers, primarily the United States and key member states of the European Union.

The main strategic goal is to transform Ukraine into a military stronghold capable of defending itself independently without the formal guarantee of NATO's Article 5, but with dense bilateral military treaties to replace it. Western allies would commit to decades of advanced conventional arms development projects, intelligence sharing, deep cyber defence integration, and localized joint production of military equipment on Ukrainian soil. At the same time, this scenario envisions a tailored, EU-led economic and security anchoring. While military integration occurs bilaterally, the European Union provides the overarching geopolitical framework through accelerated EU membership, structural reconstruction funds, and partial security coordination under Article 42.7 of the EU Treaty (mutual defence clause).

However, the model of armed neutrality poses significant structural vulnerabilities and long-term financial issues. For Ukraine, the lack of an explicit, multilateral nuclear umbrella leaves it vulnerable to sustained grey-zone aggression, hybrid warfare, and potential future nuclear blackmail by the Kremlin.

Conclusions

The war between Russia and Ukraine reminded Europeans and the entire civilized world again that freedom is not free and not cheap. The Russian unjustified war in Ukraine is unlikely to end this year or anytime soon. The freedom requires an autonomous defence, military, and energy policy, rather than dependence on Russian oil and natural gas. Finally, the European Union learned that Russia must never again hold Europe hostage to energy imports.

Five years of full-scale war have permanently shattered the post-Cold War security architecture of Europe, replacing the illusion of a swift tactical victory with the grim realities of industrial attrition. The transition from a failed Russian *Blitzkrieg* into a grinding, transparent battlefield has proven that modern warfare is dictated by economic endurance, technological adaptation, and the sheer capacity of military supply chains. On the domestic front, profound fatigue is reshaping the societal landscapes of both nations; a

wearry Ukrainian public increasingly weighs pragmatic security guarantees against absolute territorial integrity, while a striking majority of the Russian populace grows desperate for an exit from an economically isolating conflict.

Simultaneously, the diplomatic paradigm has entered a phase of intense realignment. The transactional pressures of a new American administration, combined with the historic geopolitical shift of the April 12 elections in Hungary, have fundamentally altered the dynamics of international support. By depriving the Kremlin of its strategic veto in Brussels, Europe has achieved a rare level of institutional cohesion, injecting fresh momentum into Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic trajectory. Yet, despite these moving diplomatic parts, the core existential deadlock remains unbroken. With both Moscow and Kyiv bound by incompatible red lines, the path forward points toward a fragile, frozen stalemate rather than a comprehensive peace. Ultimately, the half-decade milestone demonstrates that until the West's industrial output or Russia's economic resilience reaches a definitive breaking point, the conflict will continue to be governed not by the art of diplomacy but by the unforgiving mathematics of sustainable attrition. A settlement of the Russo-Ukrainian war that would help Ukraine achieve its European integration goals would pose a profound geopolitical challenge to Vladimir Putin.

In essence, this result would indicate that both Putin and Ukraine have lost the war. Russia must thus be forced to accept this result through political, economic, and military pressure. Putin still thinks he can win the war, so this will take time. This is the reason why, regrettably, there is now no end in sight to the war.

Ultimately, the analysis of the changing geopolitical realities in the fifth year of the conflict leads to one definitive conclusion: a true and lasting peace in Ukraine cannot be achieved simply by drawing a temporary ceasefire line on a map or by freezing the front lines through ad hoc diplomatic means. Such measures would only treat the symptoms of the crisis, leaving behind a highly volatile, deeply militarized fault line in the heart of Europe. A change in US security policy is needed, replacing neo-imperialist behaviour with a strengthening of the alliance system.

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