

## Case Study Analysis of Conflict Dynamics in Ukraine, 2022–2027

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### Abstract

The Russia–Ukraine conflict, initiated during the 2014 regional territorial onset and systematically altered by the 2022 full-scale military invasion, has undergone a profound structural transformation in its fifth year of high-intensity warfare. This systemic realignment has severely compromised post-Cold War multilateral frameworks, shifting the diplomatic paradigm toward highly fragmented and transactional negotiation structures. This study aims to evaluate the contemporary structural transformation of the geopolitical landscape, specifically analysing how shifting international mediation dynamics and external diplomatic variables influence potential conflict resolution pathways. Utilizing a qualitative, comparative scenario-analysis methodology grounded in neorealist international relations theory, this paper operationalizes and assesses the strategic trajectories of the conflict.

The analytical framework operationalizes China's policy of "constructive ambiguity" as a distinct category of macroeconomic and technological alignment, and evaluates the foreign policy trajectories of the United States administration through a transactional structural framework. The analysis reveals that the core strategic "red lines" of the belligerents remain politically and mathematically mutually exclusive, as demonstrated by contemporary empirical data from the June 2026 diplomatic initiatives. The findings indicate that the "Korean Peninsula model", operationalized as a de

facto territorial partition under an unsigned armistice, and "armed neutrality", conceptualized as a non-aligned, heavily fortified state model sustained by Western bilateral defence treaties, constitute the only structurally plausible mid-term trajectories. The scholarly implications of this study suggest that a durable resolution cannot be achieved through ad hoc diplomatic expedients or superficial ceasefire lines. Long-term regional stability structurally necessitates a fundamental stabilization of the multilateral security architecture capable of enforcing mutual compromises and binding institutional guarantees.

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**Keywords:** Russo-Ukrainian war, Putin, Russian aggression, political stalemate

## **Introduction**

Thousands of Ukrainian military personnel 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.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods design to evaluate the structural transformation of the contemporary geopolitical landscape and shifting international mediation dynamics. This specific research design was selected and justified because the complexity of an active conflict environment requires the simultaneous collection and analysis of independent quantitative metrics and qualitative indicators within the same temporal frame. The quantitative strand provided verifiable macroeconomic and demographic parameters, while the qualitative strand offered contextual thematic insights into diplomatic strategies and autocratic decision-making structures. Merging both strands allowed the study to triangulate findings, mitigating the inherent generalizability limitations of purely qualitative data and the depth constraints of standalone quantitative metrics.

### **Data Sources and Analytical Tools**

Data collection encompassed diverse, validated secondary datasets spanning the period from the 2014 initial territorial conflict to the fifth year of the 2022 full-scale invasion. Quantitative data processing and analysis were conducted using specific computational software tools to ensure replication: Geospatial and Tactical Data: Daily front-line shifts, military fortifications, and territorial control data were obtained from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and the Critical Threats Project database. Spatial modelling, buffer zone calculations, and cartographic visualizations were executed utilizing ArcGIS Pro (v3.2).

Macroeconomic and Demographic Indicators: Financial datasets, trade volume reports, and labour force shortfalls were sourced from the World Bank, the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, and the BNE Intel News databases. Structural economic trends and currency exchange volumes from the Moscow Exchange (MOEX) were modelled and statistically analysed using R (v4.3.1) via the tidyverse and forecast packages. Societal and Humanitarian Data: Public opinion surveys regarding territorial concessions and wartime morale were obtained from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) and Gallup public databases. Humanitarian displacement metrics were extracted from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data portal. Qualitative source materials, including official diplomatic transcripts, state-sanctioned policy briefs from the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS), and executive intelligence assessments, were systematically coded and analysed through a neorealist framework using MAXQDA (v24.1) to isolate recurrent strategic imperatives.

## **Data Integration Procedure**

The integration of quantitative and qualitative modalities occurred at the analytical and interpretive stages through a triangulation protocol and the construction of a joint display. Quantitative outputs—such as mapped frontline coordinates from ArcGIS and macroeconomic indicators from R—were directly juxtaposed against qualitative policy frameworks coded in MAXQDA, including China's "constructive ambiguity" parameters and Donald Trump's 28-point peace draft. By mapping statistical data points directly alongside thematic narratives, the integration procedure evaluated whether empirical battlefield trajectories and economic endurance indicators converged with or diverged from the declared political "red lines" of the belligerents. This systematic convergence formed the empirical basis for the final meta-inferences and scenario-modelling deductions presented in this study.

## **Ethical Considerations**

As this study relied exclusively on anonymized, public-use secondary datasets and open-source intelligence (OSINT), it did not require institutional review board (IRB) oversight. However, strict ethical protocols were maintained regarding the handling of sensitive humanitarian and conflict-related data. Secondary metrics tracking internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, and high-intensity battlefield casualties from UNHCR and intelligence briefs were handled with strict analytical neutrality to prevent the instrumentalization or dehumanization of vulnerable populations. No proprietary, classified, or non-consensual human subject data were utilized, ensuring full compliance with the ethical standards governing secondary data analysis in active geopolitical conflicts.

## **Methodological Limitations**

Several structural limitations inherent to active conflict zones bounded the findings of this research, primarily regarding data reliability, casualty estimations, and macroeconomic opacity. First, frontline tracking data and open-source intelligence (OSINT) metrics derived from platforms such as the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) remained inherently subject to fog-of-war distortions, tactical military disinformation, and reporting lags. Second, battlefield casualty figures and troop ceilings remained highly politicized and state-censored by both belligerents; consequently, this study utilized consensus ranges synthesized from Western intelligence assessments rather than unilateral state declarations, which introduced an unavoidable margin of estimation error. Third, Russian state-reported economic indicators, specifically concerning defence budget allocations, military expenditures, and

domestic labour shortages, were subject to systemic data manipulation and classification by the Kremlin.

To mitigate this institutional opacity, the study required rigorous triangulation with independent cross-border trade datasets from international sources, including BNE Intel News and Chinese customs authorities. Due to these compounding data constraints, the findings presented in this manuscript represent optimal structural projections based on available empirical data as of mid-2026, rather than absolute predictive certainties.

## **Results**

### **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 \$170 billion (Kyiv School of Economics, 2024). 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, 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 & Libet, 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 (United Nations Development Programme, 2026).

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 (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 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 & McCabe, 2026). Concurrently, Russia's wartime economy is under increasing pressure, as shown by a drop in manufacturing, a predicted 0.6 percent growth rate for 2025, and the lack of tech companies that can compete internationally to increase long-term productivity. (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026).

The Russian economy is facing a significant deceleration and is on the path to stagnation by 2026. This is backed by the recent downgrade of the GDP growth projection to 0.4% by the Russian Ministry of Economic Development, indicating a state of stagnation. The wartime economic framework is being strained by increasing monetary restrictions, critical labour shortages, and falling oil income. The Russian economy is facing a significant deceleration and is on the path to stagnation by 2026. This is backed by the recent downgrade of the GDP growth projection to 0.4% by the Russian Ministry of Economic Development, indicating a state of stagnation. The wartime economic framework is being strained by increasing monetary restrictions, critical labour shortages, and falling oil income. (Russia Pivot to Asia, 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. The exact percentage of Russian GDP allocated to financing the war remains uncertain due to the lack of a transparent budget; consequently, analyses must depend solely upon open-source data, which offer conflicting estimates.

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% (Liang et al.,

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 (Kutieliya & Protz, 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 (Cancian & Snegovaya, 2025). Even more, North Korea sent around 11,000 troops to the frontline in Kursk Oblast, and already 6,000 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 & Faragasso, 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, 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 & Rühlig, 2025). 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 (Institute for the Study of War & Critical Threats Project, 2026). An area roughly equivalent to half the U.S. state of Illinois, as illustrated in the next figure.

**Figure 1:** Territorial Control in Ukraine as of 19 May 2026



*Note. Adapted from Interactive map: Russia's invasion of Ukraine, by Institute for the Study of War & Critical Threats Project, 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, 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 (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026). 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 (Jones & McCabe, 2026, p.1.). 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, public willingness to endure prolonged economic hardship and personal danger indefinitely has dropped significantly (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 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, 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 is a sharp increase from the 8–10% noted in the first year of the conflict, revealing a widening gap between the political leadership's unwavering war objectives and a weary public yearning for stability. (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2026).

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 & Gryz, 2026). 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 (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026). 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 & McCabe, 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 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2026). 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 (Mealha, 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, 2026).

Empirical simulations conducted by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research indicate that the supply shock generated by the conflict significantly amplified global price instability (National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2022). 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 (National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 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**

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. Geopolitical tensions involving external actors like Iran further complicate the conflict's resolution.

At the time of writing, the United States is at war with Iran. The armed conflict (the US-Israeli Operation Epic Fury) erupted on February 28, and although a fragile ceasefire brokered by Pakistan was reached on April 8, fighting and mutual missile strikes have continued in recent days in the Persian Gulf and surrounding countries (such as Kuwait and Bahrain). (U.S. Department of War, 2026). The US Congress has not officially, legally issued a declaration of war, given that President Donald Trump launched the attack on his own authority as a "major military operation," but in reality, on the ground, this is a real, devastating war.

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 (Small Wars Journal, 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, 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 such as BRICS+ and OPEC+ to circumvent Western isolation and project global influence. By framing its struggle as resistance to US hegemony (Gabuev, 2024), Russia has maintained vital economic ties with major neutral powers such as 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, 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 (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 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 (Kotyakov, 2025), a drastic shrinkage of the domestic labour force that has already driven up wages and sparked high internal inflation. (Yakov & Partners, 2023; Nabiullina, 2026). 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 (National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2022). 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.

The strategic supply chain between China and Russia has heavily prioritized the transfer of critical drone-manufacturing components, specifically optical cables and lithium-ion batteries. Following localized aerial strikes that disabled Russia's singular domestic fibre manufacturing plant in Saransk, the Russian defence and telecommunications sectors became 100% dependent on Chinese imports (The Moscow Times, 2026). This economic

and material dependency has drastically transformed battlefield dynamics in the region, providing Russian forces with the foundational materials required to construct unjammable, line-of-sight First-Person View (FPV) strike drones (The Washington Post, 2025).

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 (Von Essen, 2023). 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 (Wiener Institut für Internationale Wirtschaftsvergleiche, 2025). 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 (Kinamedia, 2026).

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 (Lannebo & Von Essen, 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%. (Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air [CREA], 2025). 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. (Kinamedia, 2026).

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 (The Moscow Times, 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. (Reuters, 2024) 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.

## **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. (StratNews Global, 2025). Donald Trump's geopolitical approach toward the conflict was predicated on the assumption that a diplomatic rapprochement with Vladimir Putin could be achieved by applying asymmetric leverage on Ukraine, the structurally weaker party (International Centre for Defence and Security, 2025). Adopting a transactional framework reminiscent of corporate negotiations, the US administration operated under

the premise that international politics functions through business-centric concessions (IntechOpen, 2026).

However, pervasive mutual distrust remains the primary systemic impediment to successful coercive diplomacy in this theatre (Toscani, 2026). Upon the cessation of hostilities, Moscow will likely exhibit deep scepticism regarding Washington's institutional commitment to sanctions relief and border enforcement (Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2025). Conversely, Kyiv, conditioned by the systemic failures of both the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the 2014 Minsk Accords, which ultimately failed to prevent the 2022 full-scale invasion, will inherently distrust any Russian non-aggression pledges (Bigot, 2025; Yale Journal, 2026). Consequently, maximizing long-term deterrence is a structural necessity for Ukraine, underscoring the critical imperative for Kyiv to secure robust, legally binding multilateral security guarantees to prevent future revanchist incursions by the Russian Federation (Royal United Services Institute, 2025).

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 strategic positions of the warring parties remain mathematically and politically mutually exclusive. Moscow's red line dictates the comprehensive recognition of its sovereignty over the Ukrainian territories it has constitutionally annexed, an objective that necessitates a freezing of the current front lines. For Vladimir Putin, any territorial retrenchment would signify domestic political vulnerability, directly undermining the institutional legitimacy of his regime. Conversely, Kyiv's position is structurally rooted in international law, demanding the preservation of its 1991 recognized borders (United Nations, 1945). President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the majority of Ukrainian society maintain that any territorial

concession would legitimize revanchist border alterations by force, thereby encouraging future subversion (Dettmer, 2026). Consequently, there is no viable middle ground within this geopolitical equation; because a specific municipality or region can only fall under a single sovereign jurisdiction, a functional compromise on territorial integrity remains structurally impossible.

The question of security guarantees is equally irreconcilable, as both nations conceptualize their national security in mutually antithetical terms. Ukraine views historical, non-binding diplomatic assurances, specifically the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, as structurally ineffective for deterrence (United Nations, 1994; Royal United Services Institute, 2025). Consequently, Kyiv maintains that the only viable institutional safeguard against future aggression is formal accession to NATO's Article 5 or an equivalent, legally binding Western military alliance. Conversely, Moscow perceives Ukraine's potential integration into Euro-Atlantic security structures, or the deployment of Western military infrastructure along its periphery, as an existential threat to its strategic depth (Westra, 2025). Vladimir Putin's non-negotiable prerequisite is absolute Ukrainian neutrality, necessitating comprehensive demilitarization, strict troop ceilings, and the excision of Euro-Atlantic integration clauses from the Ukrainian constitution. Thus, what Russia defines as a necessary geopolitical buffer zone, Ukraine recognizes as a condition of total systemic vulnerability. If Ukraine accepts neutrality absent external military guarantees, Moscow retains the strategic latitude to resume hostilities; however, if Ukraine secures robust Western defence commitments, the Russian Federation must concede the strategic failure of its primary *casus belli*.

This clash of core national interests elucidates why Donald Trump's 28-point peace framework ultimately stalled. The United States mediation apparatus attempted to bridge this geopolitical chasm by demanding the simultaneous abandonment of both parties' primary red lines. The proposed framework required Ukraine to renounce its Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions and accept the contemporary territorial status quo; concurrently, it mandated that the Russian Federation accept a neutral Ukraine reinforced by an extensive Western enforcement mechanism designed to automatically reactivate comprehensive global sanctions and military retaliation in the event of renewed Russian aggression (Cancian & Snegovaya, 2025). Because Kyiv systematically rejects security assurances outside the institutional framework of NATO, and Moscow categorically opposes any form of Western military oversight or enforcement within Ukraine, the collision of these incompatible strategic imperatives has completely paralyzed the diplomatic process.

This geopolitical equation was further transfigured by the historic April 12, 2026, general elections in Hungary, which fundamentally dismantled the Kremlin's long-standing diplomatic calculus within the European Union.

The electoral defeat of Viktor Orbán's administration and the subsequent ascension of Péter Magyar's government deprived Vladimir Putin of his primary veto-wielding proxy in Brussels (Kolyandr, 2026). For a prolonged duration, Moscow leveraged Budapest's institutional position to delay restrictive EU sanction packages and obstruct critical macroeconomic assistance destined for Ukraine. This domestic political shift effectively closed a critical institutional loophole, thereby enabling Western Europe to present a unified diplomatic front and providing Kyiv with renewed strategic momentum for its accelerated European Union accession process.

Despite Hungary's newly established administration (the TISZA government led by Peter Magyar) adopting 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 strategic red lines. Vladimir Putin continues to demand the permanent international recognition of Russia's annexed oblasts and a legally binding guarantee precluding Ukraine's accession to NATO (Lieven & Episkopos, 2026). Conversely, President Zelenskyy and a revitalized European coalition maintain that any ceasefire absent ironclad, Western-backed military guarantees would merely provide Moscow with a tactical pause to reconstitute its forces for a future invasion. Global forecasting venues mirror this diplomatic stalemate; throughout early 2026, international prediction markets 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 security architecture achieved greater cohesion following the political shift on April 12, strategic pragmatism dictates that the region cannot achieve total decoupling instantly. Empirical data indicates that the European Union will likely maintain structured, defensive energy strategies regarding lingering Russian gas dependencies for years to come. Consequently, as the conflict endures, the statistically most probable trajectory is not a comprehensive, just peace, but rather a slow progression toward a "frozen conflict" or a de facto Korean-style armistice. The regional realities of 2026 demonstrate that while external political shocks, such as administrative transitions in Washington or a historic government transition in Budapest, can successfully alter the balance of diplomatic isolation and economic assistance, they cannot easily dissolve the existential core of the war. Multiple years of high-intensity industrialized warfare have locked both combatants into a zero-sum struggle where the political survival of both regimes remains structurally 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 prospects for a lasting peace will remain subordinate to the brutal mathematics of sustainable attrition.

The military, economic, and societal structures of both the Russian Federation and Ukraine continue to experience severe degradation. Although both belligerents exhibit manifest indications of exhaustion, neither side has capitulated on its primary strategic objectives. Russia faces significant human casualties, macroeconomic stagnation, and a critical workforce shortage. As demonstrated by the state-sanctioned elimination of political dissidents, the Kremlin systematically neutralizes potential challengers to enforce domestic compliance. The demise of Yevgeny Prigozhin underscored the Kremlin's zero-tolerance policy toward domestic dissent, thereby reinforcing Vladimir Putin's internal authority (Stanovaya, 2023). Furthermore, intelligence assessments suggest that the Russian leadership faces minimal short-term domestic pressure to halt the conflict, largely due to a highly centralized and isolated decision-making structure that insulates the political elite from unfavourable battlefield realities (Hill & Stent, 2024). Consequently, the critical question remains: what are the potential structural outcomes of this protracted conflict?

### **III. The Political and Diplomatic Stalemate**

The political and diplomatic stalemate in the Russia-Ukraine war is defined by fundamentally incompatible strategic red lines, wherein the core survival requirements of each sovereign state structurally necessitate the total capitulation of the other, thereby eliminating the possibility of a middle-ground compromise. This systemic deadlock is rooted in two primary dimensions: first, the irresolvable conflict between Moscow's demand for formal international recognition of its sovereignty over annexed Ukrainian regions and Kyiv's categorical refusal to concede territory; and second, the structural contradiction between Ukraine's insistence on institutional NATO membership as an existential safeguard and the Russian Federation's non-negotiable demand for a permanently 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, 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 (United

Nations, 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, 2026). 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 geopolitical alignment remains a core element of the political stalemate, as both nations conceptualize their national survival in mutually antithetical terms. From Ukraine's perspective, neutrality constitutes an existential threat; Kyiv views any demand for absolute neutrality not as a diplomatic compromise, but as a structural roadmap toward state elimination. This profound distrust is rooted in the historical failure of non-binding security assurances, most notably the 1994 Budapest Memorandum (United Nations, 1994). Under this agreement, Ukraine surrendered the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal in exchange for explicit, yet non-enforceable commitments from the Russian Federation, the United States, and the United Kingdom to respect its sovereignty and existing borders (Royal United Services Institute, 2025).

The subsequent Russian invasions of 2014 and 2022 demonstrated to the Ukrainian public that political declarations offer zero institutional protection against revisionist powers. Consequently, Kyiv maintains that a neutral, disarmed Ukraine would simply function as a defenceless target for future Russian subversion. For Ukraine, the only credible deterrent against a

renewed conflict is formal NATO accession under the 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 Euro-Atlantic alliance represents an absolute, non-negotiable red line. The Kremlin perceives the eastward expansion of NATO not as a defensive mechanism, but as an offensive encirclement designed to project American military infrastructure directly onto Russia's vulnerable southwestern periphery. Vladimir Putin has repeatedly asserted that a highly militarized Ukraine aligned with the West poses an unacceptable threat to Russia's geopolitical survival. Moscow's primary war aim remains the permanent neutralization of Ukraine, demanding that Kyiv formally excise Euro-Atlantic integration clauses from its constitution, implement strict caps on its standing armed forces, and prohibit foreign troops or NATO weapons systems from its territory (Mills, 2026).

This architecture creates an absolute deadlock: what Russia defines as a vital and necessary geopolitical buffer zone, Ukraine recognizes as a state of total, fatal vulnerability. If Ukraine accepts neutrality absent ironclad external defence mechanisms, it risks future invasion; conversely, if the West grants Ukraine these specific guarantees, Russia considers its primary strategic objective defeated, ensuring that neither belligerent is willing to concede at the negotiating table.

### **Domestic Political Constraints**

Both Kyiv and Moscow operate under intense domestic pressures that severely circumscribe their capacity for diplomatic manoeuvring, transforming the peace process into a high-stakes survival gamble for both leaderships. For Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, political constraints are defined by the democratic nature of his state and the immense sacrifices of the population. After years of national mobilization, catastrophic infrastructure degradation, and hundreds of thousands of casualties, any peace framework involving formal territorial concessions or a permanent ban on NATO integration would be perceived domestically as a national capitulation. Zelenskyy must balance immense international diplomatic pressure against the consensus of a Ukrainian society and a highly motivated military that views compromised peace terms as an insult to those who perished. Accepting a flawed settlement risks triggering severe domestic political instability, fracturing the national consensus, or inducing 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 resolution. To ensure the survival of his regime and its historical legacy, he must secure a final settlement that can be presented to the Russian public as a historic triumph over the West. This necessitates that Moscow extract tangible, lasting benefits from the negotiating table, such as the explicit annexation of Ukrainian regions and a formal halt to NATO expansion (Westra, 2025). Putin's historical grievances stretch back to the period preceding German reunification. In 1990, Western officials and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev investigated how NATO could accommodate a united Germany without disrupting the European security architecture. Since then, Moscow has maintained that the West promised NATO would not expand eastward; however, this assertion was unsupported by any official treaty or instrument at the time, and in reality, no formal, legally binding agreement was ever struck to halt NATO's expansion. Anything less than a perceived victory could be interpreted by Russia's nationalist elite and those who benefit from the militarized state 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, evolving from a localized regional crisis into a highly complex, protracted proxy confrontation. The United States maintains 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 favors Moscow's territorial and security demands (StratNews Global, 2025). 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) remain 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

demonstrated by the peace talks in Istanbul, which allowed for direct, multi-level diplomatic contacts between Russian, Ukrainian, and American delegations (Mills, 2026). This was further reinforced by subsequent official contacts in Abu Dhabi, signalling a shift toward fragmented, transactional diplomacy. Simultaneously, neither a lasting ceasefire nor a comprehensive peace brokered by these states has been achieved.

However, China's potential as a genuine peacemaker faces severe structural limitations, primarily rooted in a profound crisis of credibility among Western stakeholders (Caruso & Rühlig, 2025). 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 exert leverage on Russia, it remains highly sceptical of any peace formula that does not include the complete withdrawal of Russian forces to its internationally recognized 1991 borders. Ultimately, China's role as a potential peacemaker 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 structures.

## **V. Strategic Options: Potential Structural Outcomes**

Various international research centres and think-tanks have outlined several strategic frameworks as potential scenarios for the conclusion of the war. Current empirical data rules out any significant changes along the frontline in 2026 that would radically affect the geopolitical resolution of the conflict (Institute for the Study of War & Critical Threats Project, 2026). Consequently, this paper considers the following scenarios to be structurally realistic.

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

This scenario conceptualized a non-resolved, "no war, no peace" operational and diplomatic framework. As the high-intensity conflict entered its fifth year, characterized by structurally entrenched frontlines and deep mutual strategic exhaustion, the "Korean Peninsula Model" transitioned from a theoretical historical analogy into a highly plausible geopolitical reality (Jones & McCabe, 2026). This trajectory was structurally predicated on the de facto territorial partition of Ukraine, achieved not through a comprehensive peace treaty, but via an unsigned, politically precarious armistice agreement.

A critical structural dimension of this model involved the institutionalization of a heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) tracing the prevailing lines of contact. This buffer zone required the permanent deployment of sophisticated international monitoring mechanisms, automated sensor arrays, and substantial defensive fortifications to prevent localized tactical incursions. Crucially, this matrix mandated a long-term, systemic freezing of the conflict absent any formal, constitutional, or legal territorial concessions by Kyiv. Under this jurisprudential arrangement, neither the Ukrainian state nor the broader international community officially recognized Russian sovereignty over the occupied oblasts, thereby maintaining the strict normative boundaries of international law and the Stimson Doctrine of non-recognition. Concurrently, however, both belligerents operationally acknowledged the absolute military impossibility of altering the established boundaries through conventional force in the short-to-medium term due to severe depletion of offensive capabilities.

Furthermore, the expansion of this model carried profound macroeconomic and geopolitical implications. At the sub-systemic level, while Scenario A offered a pragmatic, immediate mechanism to halt catastrophic human casualties and temporarily stabilize volatile global energy and commodity markets, it simultaneously codified a highly fragile and volatile status quo. The cessation of active, large-scale manoeuvre warfare did not equate to systemic stabilization; rather, it transformed Ukrainian territory into a permanent, heavily militarized fault line of 21st-century geopolitics. The establishment of this armed armistice guaranteed that while an unstable negative peace was achieved on the periphery, the underlying systemic and ideological rivalry between the Russian Federation and the transatlantic alliance remained fundamentally unresolved. Ukraine was left in a state of perpetual strategic suspension, where the absence of formal multilateral nuclear or conventional security umbrellas subjected its domestic economy to continuous grey-zone vulnerability, structural disinvestment, and the persistent threat of a sudden resumption of hostilities by a revisionist neighbour.

### **Scenario B: Armed Neutrality**

This scenario was predicated on the strategic configuration of Ukraine functioning as a heavily fortified, non-aligned sovereign state, often conceptualized in international relations literature as the "porcupine" or "Fortress Israel" model (Lieven & Episkopos, 2026). Within this operational framework, Kyiv formally consented to accept a permanent non-NATO strategic status, thereby legally addressing and neutralizing the Russian Federation's primary geopolitical *casus belli*. In return for renouncing its Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions under Article 5, Ukraine did not rely on

fragile, non-binding diplomatic promises. Instead, the state secured legally binding, long-term bilateral security frameworks and advanced military commitments from a powerful coalition of Western nations, spearheaded by the United States and key member states of the European Union.

The primary strategic objective of this model was to transform Ukraine into an autonomous military stronghold capable of generating independent, conventional deterrence without the explicit extension of a multilateral nuclear umbrella. To substitute for the absence of NATO's collective defence clause, these dense bilateral defence treaties mandated decades of institutionalized cooperation. Western allies committed to sustained transfers of advanced conventional weaponry, continuous intelligence sharing, deep cyber defence integration, and the establishment of localized joint-venture defence production facilities directly on Ukrainian soil. This industrial approach aimed to insulate Ukraine's domestic military capacity from external supply chain disruptions and political fluctuations in Western capitals, ensuring a sustainable, indigenous output of ammunition and high-technology systems.

Concurrently, this scenario envisioned a tailored, European Union-led economic and institutional anchoring to reinforce Ukraine's societal resilience. While military integration occurred strictly via parallel bilateral channels to respect formal neutrality, the European Union provided the overarching geopolitical framework through an accelerated EU accession process and extensive structural reconstruction funding (Kyiv School of Economics, 2024). Crucially, this economic integration was designed to overlap with partial security coordination under Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty—the EU's mutual defence clause. These legal mechanisms provided an institutional grey-zone deterrent: while not carrying the immediate military weight of NATO's Article 5, it bound European member states to render assistance by all means in their power if Ukraine faced renewed territorial subversion.

However, the comprehensive evaluation of the armed neutrality model revealed critical structural vulnerabilities and long-term financial liabilities. For Kyiv, the total absence of an explicit, multilateral nuclear extended deterrence framework left the state highly exposed to sustained gray-zone aggression, hybrid warfare subversion, and persistent nuclear coercion by the Kremlin. Furthermore, transitioning to a permanent wartime economy placed a staggering fiscal burden on Ukraine's domestic budget, requiring the permanent diversion of a massive percentage of GDP toward military expenditures (Kutieliava & Protz, 2026). This structural deficit guaranteed that the state remained entirely dependent on continuous Western macroeconomic subsidies, transforming armed neutrality into a financially precarious and geopolitically fragile equilibrium.

## Discussion

The empirical and qualitative findings of this study demonstrate that the Russia–Ukraine war has transitioned into a highly institutionalized, structurally rigid conflict governed by the unforgiving logic of industrial attrition. This reality strongly validates the neorealist balance-of-power framework, illustrating that beneath the fluctuating dynamics of diplomatic rhetoric, the systemic behaviour of both sovereign actors is dictated by structural survival imperatives. The transition from the fluid territorial manoeuvres characteristic of the 2022 initial invasion to the deeply entrenched frontline geography of mid-2026 highlights a systemic shift: modern high-intensity warfare remains fundamentally bounded by economic endurance, technological transparency via unmanned systems, and the material throughput of defence supply chains (Jones & McCabe, 2026; Kutielieva & Protz, 2026).

A critical theoretical contribution of this research lies in its application of conflict resolution theory, specifically Zartman's concept of a mutually hurting stalemate (MHS), to the contemporary geopolitical reality. While both belligerents exhibit manifest indicators of acute societal and economic exhaustion, the structural threshold for a ripe diplomatic moment has not been reached. This paradox exists because the survival requirements of each leadership are anchored in completely antithetical and mutually exclusive red lines. For Kyiv, any formalized territorial concession or permanent exclusion from Euro-Atlantic integration is structurally recognized as an existential pathway to state elimination, especially given the historical precedents of non-binding assurances such as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum (United Nations, 1994; Soltys, 2023). Conversely, for the autocratic regime in Moscow, relinquishing constitutionally annexed oblasts or failing to enforce Ukrainian neutrality threatens the internal institutional legitimacy of the Kremlin, transforming the frontline into a zero-sum struggle for regime survival (Hill & Stent, 2024; Stanovaya, 2023).

This domestic rigidity explains the operational paralysis and ultimate stagnation of Donald Trump's 28-point peace framework (Cancian & Snegovaya, 2025). The United States mediation apparatus operated under a commercial, transactional paradigm, erroneously assuming that territorial sovereignty and institutional security guarantees could be traded through business-centric compromises. However, as this study's convergent parallel mixed-methods analysis indicates, Washington's attempt to substitute formal NATO Article 5 protection with a Western "trigger mechanism" failed to bridge the mistrust chasm. Because Kyiv systematically distrusts paper-based guarantees outside of a multilateral nuclear umbrella (Royal United Services Institute, 2025), and Moscow categorically rejects any formal Western military oversight within its designated sphere of influence, the transactional

approach proved structurally incapable of dissolving the existential core of the conflict.

Concurrently, the regionalization of diplomacy has fundamentally altered the post-Cold War security architecture. The paralysis of traditional multilateral institutions like the OSCE and the UNSC has facilitated a paradigm shift toward alternative, fragmented mediation channels in the Global South, such as the Istanbul and Abu Dhabi tracks (Mills, 2026). Within this decentralized arena, China's strategy of "constructive ambiguity" functions not as an impartial peace-making endeavour, but as a calculated mechanism of power politics (Caruso & Rühlig, 2025). By providing a vital macroeconomic and technological lifeline to Moscow while simultaneously championing non-Western peace narratives, Beijing successfully avoids a total Russian collapse, limits Euro-Atlantic overreach, and establishes itself as a permanent manager of European security, all while maintaining strategic flexibility.

Finally, the historic April 12, 2026, general elections in Hungary introduce a critical new variable into Europe's security calculus, demonstrating how external political shocks can alter diplomatic dynamics without easily dissolving the core mechanics of the war. The electoral defeat of Viktor Orbán's administration and the subsequent ascension of Péter Magyar's government closed a vital institutional loophole that the Kremlin had leveraged for years to obstruct EU restrictive measures and financial assistance (Kolyandr, 2026). While this political transition granted the European Union unprecedented strategic cohesion and accelerated Kyiv's institutional integration, the fundamental mathematics of the war remain bound to the frontline. Pragmatism dictates that Europe cannot decouple from defensive energy dependencies overnight.

Therefore, when juxtaposed against predictive market data (Polymarket, 2025), the findings of this study reinforce that the most statistically probable trajectory is a slow drift toward a "frozen conflict" or a de facto Korean-style partition. The scholarly implication of this structural assessment is profound: a durable peace cannot be achieved through ad hoc geographical lines on a map. Until the industrial capacity of the West or the economic resilience of the Russian state reaches a definitive breaking point, the conflict will remain governed by sustainable attrition, illustrating that a lasting solution structurally requires a fundamental stabilization of the wider multilateral alliance system capable of enforcing ironclad, binding guarantees.

## Conclusions

The protracted conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine has fundamentally re-emphasized to the international community that the preservation of democratic sovereignty entails high macroeconomic and

strategic costs. The ongoing war is highly unlikely to achieve a definitive resolution in the short term. Consequently, maintaining strategic autonomy necessitates the institutionalization of independent defence, military, and energy policies, thereby precluding structural reliance on Russian hydrocarbon exports. This strategic imperative precipitated a paradigm shift within the European Union, which prioritized the diversification of energy matrices to mitigate the geopolitical risks associated with Russian imports (European Council, 2022).

Multiple years of high-intensity warfare have permanently dismantled the post-Cold War European security architecture, replacing the initial anticipation of a swift tactical resolution with the systemic realities of industrial attrition. The transition from the failed Russian initial offensive into a grinding, technologically transparent battlefield demonstrates that contemporary warfare is dictated by economic endurance, rapid technological adaptation, and the logistical capacity of defence supply chains (Jones & McCabe, 2026). On the domestic front, profound attrition fatigue is reshaping the societal landscapes of both belligerents; empirical assessments indicate that a weary Ukrainian public increasingly weighs the pragmatism of robust security guarantees against the absolute restoration of territorial integrity (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2026; Vigers, 2025), while a significant portion of the Russian populace experiences the socioeconomic pressures of a structurally isolating conflict.

Concurrently, the diplomatic architecture has entered a phase of intense realignment. The transactional pressures exerted by the United States administration, combined with the structural geopolitical shift resulting from the April 12, 2026, general elections in Hungary, have fundamentally altered the dynamics of international assistance. By depriving the Kremlin of its primary institutional veto within European structures, the European Union has achieved unprecedented strategic cohesion, injecting renewed momentum into Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration trajectory (Kolyandr, 2026). Yet, despite these shifting diplomatic variables, the core existential deadlock remains unbroken. Because both Moscow and Kyiv operate under incompatible strategic imperatives, the contemporary trajectory points toward a fragile, frozen stalemate rather than a comprehensive, negotiated peace settlement. Ultimately, this milestone demonstrates that until Western industrial output or Russian macroeconomic resilience reaches a definitive breaking point, the conflict will remain governed not by diplomatic art, but by the systemic mathematics of sustainable attrition (Kutieliyeva & Protz, 2026).

A diplomatic resolution that facilitates Ukraine's comprehensive European integration goals would constitute a profound geopolitical failure for Vladimir Putin's revisionist foreign policy. In essence, a settlement based on these parameters would signal a structural defeat for the Kremlin's strategic

objectives. Consequently, the Russian Federation must be compelled to accept such an outcome through sustained, coordinated political, economic, and military coercion. However, because the Russian leadership operates under the assumption that it can achieve a favourable asymmetric outcome through protracted attrition, the timeline for potential negotiation remains indefinitely extended, leaving no immediate end in sight to the hostilities.

Ultimately, the analysis of the shifting geopolitical realities in the fifth year of the conflict yields a definitive conclusion: a durable and sustainable peace in Ukraine cannot be achieved through the mere demarcation of a temporary ceasefire line or the freezing of current frontlines via ad hoc diplomatic expedients. Such superficial measures would merely treat the symptoms of the systemic crisis, leaving a highly volatile, deeply militarized fault line in the centre of Europe. To establish long-term stability, a fundamental recalibration of Transatlantic security policy is required, replacing unilateral frameworks with a comprehensive strengthening of the rules-based multilateral alliance system.

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