



The Twilight of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract

This article analyses the Russia-Ukraine war, which has entered a critical „twilight phase“. This situation is characterised by Ukraine’s dwindling capacities, declining Western support, internal divisions within the West, and an uncertain future amid a potential political shift under Donald Trump. It is contended that a lack of coherent Western strategy, failed peace attempts, questionable Ukrainian peace plans, and ineffective sanctions on Russia have further escalated the conflict. Ukraine’s intensified efforts to join NATO and the EU are discussed in the context of increasingly precarious circumstances. The article concludes with a discussion hypothesizing that the outcome of the war will largely depend on cooperation between Russia and the United States, with less influence from the decisions of Western powers or Ukraine.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel analysiert den Russland-Ukraine-Krieg, der in eine kritische „Zwielicht-Phase“ eingetreten ist. Diese Situation ist gekennzeichnet durch die schwindenden Kapazitäten der Ukraine, den abnehmenden westlichen Rückhalt, interne Spannungen im Westen und eine ungewisse Zukunft angesichts eines möglichen politischen Wandels unter Donald Trump. Es wird behauptet, dass ein Mangel an kohärenter westlicher Strategie, gescheiterte Friedensversuche, fragwürdige ukrainische Friedenspläne und unwirksame Sanktionen gegen Russland den Konflikt weiter verschärft haben. Die verstärkten Bemühungen der Ukraine, der NATO und der EU beizutreten, werden im Kontext zunehmend prekärer Umstände erörtert. Der Artikel schließt mit einer Diskussion, in der die Hypothese aufgestellt wird, dass der Ausgang des Krieges weitgehend von der Zusammenarbeit zwischen Russland und den Vereinigten Staaten abhängen wird, während die Entscheidungen westlicher Mächte oder der Ukraine weniger Einfluss haben könnten.

Keywords/Schlüsselwörter

Ukraine, Russia, EU, NATO, sanctions, political twilight, war politics

Ukraine, Russland, EU, NATO, Sanktionen, politischer Übergang, Kriegspolitik

1 Introduction

Close to three years after the advent of the Russian Special Military Operations, which started on February 22, 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian War has entered a state where alliances and outcomes are becoming increasingly uncertain. For Ukraine, this creates a sense of a geopolitical “twilight zone” condition. Several factors have contributed to this situation. Donald Trump has been elected as the 47th President of the US and has indicated that he will change the outgoing Biden administration’s policies on the Russo-Ukrainian war. Europe is

disunited on the same issue. Hungary and Slovakia object to many issues related to the European Council presidency's policy on aid and support for Ukraine. There is a groundswell of opposition to domestic policies in Germany and France, potentially culminating in political dysfunction. Ukraine is experiencing a critical manpower shortage, which contributes to its armed forces being depleted without the possibility of increasing the number of its troops on the battlefield. Demographically, Ukraine is in decline. A significant number of military-age men and other age groups have left the country and have settled abroad. The delivery of military aid is dwindling as the Collective West has exhausted its military arsenal, and the production of new military hardware in the West is slow. Ukraine is militarily outgunned and outnumbered, and Russian troops are advancing at an increased pace, conquering further Ukrainian territory (Jakupec, forthcoming 2025).

On the domestic front, Ukraine's population is experiencing a significant energy shortfall along with Russia's ongoing and relentless attacks on civilian infrastructure. In light of this problematic situation, Western governments, particularly the Biden administration, are endeavouring to provide as much assistance to Ukraine as possible before Donald Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2025. In response to Trump's upcoming presidency and his potential policies to cut or reduce aid for Ukraine and seek an end to the war, the West continues pursuing its failed strategy, which it hopes to save by Trump-proofing ongoing aid to Ukraine.

2 The West's Failed Strategies

Trump is inheriting a failed Western Alliance strategy which addresses the Russo-Ukrainian War. From the beginning of the Russian Special Military Operation in Ukraine, the West had difficulties in articulating a comprehensive and coherent strategy. Even after three years of war, it is difficult to ascertain the West's strategy. It can be argued that the West substituted strategy with slogans. It started with Ukraine must win, followed by Ukraine must not lose. Subsequently, the 'strategy' changed to Russia must not win. The problem is that these strategies did not clearly identify what 'winning' or 'losing' means. Zelenskyy's plan as a basis for peace negotiations was the closest the West came to having a strategy. In short, and among other things, this meant that victory from the Ukrainian perspective included Russia's withdrawal of all its troops to the pre-2014 internationally recognised Ukrainian borders, including withdrawal from Crimea, the establishment of an international tribunal to prosecute members of the Russian government, including Putin, for war crimes, and securing Russia's reparations payments.

These demands, or strategic goals, so to speak, sounded feasible at the beginning of the Russian Special Military Operation because the Ukrainian military forces were winning against and pushing back the Russian war machine. Arguably, the tide turned following the failed Ukrainian Summer Offensive and Russia's advances. Thus, Zelenskyy's strategic goal, adopted by the West, became increasingly unattainable. Instead of reviewing and adjusting its strategies to the realities of the military situation on the battlefield, the West held steadfast to the belief that Ukraine must and will win. The proposition was that Ukraine would win as long as the West supplied military hardware, technical support, and intelligence. Considering the situation after three years of the Russia-Ukraine War, the West's strategy did not make much sense.

Instead of focusing on pursuing peace initiatives or at least fostering peace negotiations, the West pursued the military option. It responded to Ukraine's demands for increasingly sophisticated weapons, including tanks, long-range missiles, F-16 aircraft and various defence systems. Ukraine claimed that these would change the battlefield situation and provide defence for the civil population. However, history has shown that this is not the case. For

example, Ukraine made much about the ‘must have’ F-16s. Although several of these aircraft were delivered, little evidence is available regarding their successful use by the Ukrainian Airforce.

Having recognised the failure of its strategy, the West is becoming desperate to put Ukraine in a more favourable position against Russia in potential negotiations. One initiative is to solve the problem of Ukraine's shortage of military personnel. Ukraine has already lowered the conscription age from 27 to 25, and the Biden administration and its Western allies are now advocating a further reduction to 18 years of age. This means that all male school leavers and tertiary or post-secondary would be subject to serving in the Ukrainian military on the Russo-Ukrainian front. Although this, according to the demographic figures, would increase the Ukrainian military personnel's strengths, Ukraine would still be outnumbered. Setting aside the moral arguments against this strategy, there is a logistical problem.

Without going into the details of military training, Basic Combat Training in the USA lasts about ten weeks. In addition, there is the mandatory Army AIT, or Advanced Individual Training, for new recruits after completing Basic Combat Training. Therefore, it can be estimated that it takes 10-12 weeks to meet standard qualifications, which is even longer for military careers requiring advanced training. In order to achieve this with an influx of new recruits, Ukraine would need additional military training personnel. Furthermore, such an increase in new recruits would require additional non-commissioned and commissioned officers to be trained. Then there is the question of who is training the military trainers. Additional trainers at all levels would have to come, most likely from either the serving military on the battlefield or from Western Alliance armed forces.

3 The Sabotaged Peace Initiative

Initially, just after the beginning of the Russian Special Military Operation, Ukraine and Russia pursued peace negotiations, which the West sabotaged. This led to escalations and a full-blown proxy war between Russia and Ukraine. For a better understanding of the willingness of Ukraine and Russia to seek peace, it may be useful to recall the situation; briefly, the initial peace negotiations in Istanbul started in March 2022 and ended unsuccessfully in April 2022. On request from Zelenskyy, the then-Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett facilitated peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine with support from President Erdogan and former German Chancellor Schröder. That is, following the Russian Special Military Operation, Volodymyr Zelenskyy asked Bennett to facilitate communication with Russia. As a result, Putin invited Bennett for talks in Moscow.

Bennett reportedly stated that during his talks in early 2022, Putin was willing to accept significant concessions (Schulenburg, 2023). Specifically, according to Bennet, Putin abandoned Russia's initial objective of demilitarising Ukraine. In return, Zelenskyy agreed to relinquish Ukraine's quest for NATO membership. Zelenskyy repeatedly gave this assurance publicly, thereby eliminating one of the major obstacles in achieving a cease-fire. Other contentious issues, such as the expectations regarding the future of Crimea and the Donbas region and security guarantees for Ukraine, were part of the agenda during the Istanbul talks.

Furthermore, according to Bennett (cited in Kujat/Funke, 2023), Ukraine and Russia appeared to be genuinely interested in reaching a cease-fire. To enhance the prospect of a cease-fire and a peace arrangement, Erdogan offered to host a Ukrainian-Russian peace conference in Istanbul on March 29, 2022. At this conference, the Ukrainian delegation presented a position paper, which formed the basis of the *Istanbul Communiqué* and subsequently became a draft treaty, incorporating ten proposals:

- “Proposal 1: Ukraine proclaims itself a neutral state, promising to remain nonaligned with any blocs and to refrain from developing nuclear weapons — in exchange for international legal guarantees. Possible guarantor states include Russia, Great Britain, China, the United States, France, Turkey, Germany, Canada, Italy, Poland, and Israel, and other states would also be welcome to join the treaty.
- Proposal 2: These international security guarantees for Ukraine would not extend to Crimea, Sevastopol, or certain areas of the Donbas. The parties to the agreement would need to define the boundaries of these regions or agree that each party understands these boundaries differently.
- Proposal 3: Ukraine vows not to join military coalitions or host foreign military bases or troop contingents. Any international military exercises would be possible only with the consent of the guarantor-states. For their part, these guarantors confirm their intention to promote Ukraine’s membership in the European Union.
- Proposal 4: Ukraine and the guarantor-states agree that (in the event of aggression, any armed attack against Ukraine, or any military operation against Ukraine) each of the guarantor-states, after urgent and immediate mutual consultations (which must be held within three days) on the exercise of the right to individual or collective self-defense (as recognised by Article 51 of the UN Charter) will provide (in response to and on the basis of an official appeal by Ukraine) assistance to Ukraine, as a permanently neutral state under attack. This aid will be facilitated through the immediate implementation of such individual or joint actions as may be necessary, including the closure of Ukraine’s airspace, the provision of necessary weapons, the use of armed force with the goal of restoring and then maintaining Ukraine’s security as a permanently neutral state.
- Proposal 5: Any such armed attack (any military operation at all) and all measures taken as a result will be reported immediately to the UN Security Council. Such measures will cease when the UNSC takes the measures needed to restore and maintain international peace and security.
- Proposal 6: Implementing protections against possible provocations, the agreement will regulate the mechanism for fulfilling Ukraine’s security guarantees based on the results of consultations between Ukraine and the guarantor-states.
- Proposal 7: The treaty provisionally applies from the date it is signed by Ukraine and all or most guarantor-states. The treaty enters force after (1) Ukraine’s permanently neutral status is approved in a nationwide referendum, (2) the introduction of the appropriate amendments in Ukraine’s Constitution, and (3) ratification in the parliaments of Ukraine and the guarantor-states.
- Proposal 8: The parties’ desire to resolve issues related to Crimea and Sevastopol shall be committed to bilateral negotiations between Ukraine and Russia for a period of 15 years. Ukraine and Russia also pledge not to resolve these issues by military means and to continue diplomatic resolution efforts.
- Proposal 9: The parties shall continue consultations (with the involvement of other guarantor-states) to prepare and agree on the provisions of a Treaty on Security Guarantees for Ukraine, ceasefire modalities, the withdrawal of troops and other paramilitary formations, and the opening and ensuring of safe-functioning humanitarian corridors on an ongoing basis, as well as the exchange of dead bodies and the release of prisoners of war and interned civilians.
- Proposal 10: The parties consider it possible to hold a meeting between the presidents of Ukraine and Russia for the purpose of signing a treaty and/or adopting political decisions regarding other remaining unresolved issues.” (Kujat/Funke, 2023: 3-4).

However, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) sought to terminate the peace negotiations, striving to perpetuate the conflict. In summary, the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States undermined the ongoing peace conference in Istanbul, where both Russia and Ukraine expressed their commitment to negotiating in good faith and successfully established, with the support of the then Israeli Prime Minister Benett’s

draft agreement (Bateman, 2023; Schulenburg et al., 2023). The member nations of the Western Alliance emulated this approach, with the objective of weakening Russia politically, militarily, economically, and diplomatically.

According to Romaniuk (2022), the then-UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson travelled to Kyiv on April 9, 2022 and informed Zelenskyy that the Western Alliance wanted the war against Russia to continue. Johnson's agenda was to ensure that Ukraine would not accept any agreements because Russia was not as powerful as the West initially thought, thus providing Ukraine with an opportunity to defeat Russia on behalf of the Collective West. Similarly, during his visit to Kyiv on April 25, 2022, the then-US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, stated that the US intends to use the Russo-Ukrainian War to permanently weaken Russia (Atwood/Hansler, 2022). A peace plan and a cease-fire were obviously not acceptable to the West. Thus, after agreeing on a compromise acceptable to Ukraine and Russia, Zelenskyy was ordered to annul the agreement.

Much has changed since Russia and Ukraine attempted to reach a cease-fire and a peace agreement. However, a cursory review of the relevant documents shows that Russia and Ukraine seriously negotiated and agreed on a peace agreement to end the war. The leaders of Ukraine and Russia, Zelenskyy and Putin, agreed to meet and to finalise the results of the bilateral negotiations. In this context, it is interesting to note that the primary outcomes of the negotiations were based on Ukraine's proposal. The West's sabotage of the peace initiative emerging from the Istanbul negotiations, as well as the rejection of proposed peace initiatives from China, the African Union, Brazil, Mexico, and Indonesia, to name but a few, militated against an immediate end to the war, which is increasingly catastrophic for both warring parties, but more so for Ukraine (de Zayas, 2024). However, with the ascent of Donald Trump to the US presidency in January 2025, there is an increased potential for new cease-fire and peace negotiations to (re-) commence, bringing to an end the Collective West's resistance to ending the war. Alternatively, as stated above, the Western Alliance may impose Trump-proof strategies, prolonging the Russo-Ukrainian War.

4 Economic War and Sanctions

Parallel to the military proxy war, the West initiated an economic war against Russia through sanctions. Thus far, these sanctions have not had the desired effect. If anything, they have affected the West more than the Russian economy, especially Germany (Gera/Barry, 2024) and France (Wiegel, 2024). Generally, the European economy is on the brink of recession. On the other hand, Russia has redirected its domestic economy to a war economy and internationally towards the East, including the BRICS bloc countries and countries of the Global South. By 2024, it became evident that the Western sanctions on Russia had failed to impact Russia's economy and its war machine (Norman/Kantchev, 2023).

Taking a step back, from the beginning of the Special Military Operation in 2022 to December 2024, the EU has adopted 15 sanction packages and asset freezes, and many Russian banks are sanctioned and banned from the SWIFT system. The numerous economic sanctions were intended to affect the energy, transport, financial, international trade, technology, and defence sectors and the Russians' access to services from the West. There is, of course, not one single sanction sector which contributed to the overall failure of the Collective West's sanctions. However, it could be argued that the EU's focus on sanctioning the financial sector generally contributed significantly to the West's failures. Khalaf (2024: n.p.) explained: "Two years after Russia's full-scale invasion, it is now painfully clear that EU sanctions have failed to meaningfully curtail Moscow's ability to wage war on its neighbour." For the purpose of this discussion, it should suffice to say that Russia has circumvented the

sanctions by dealing with third countries, such as India (a BRICS member), Turkey (a NATO member), Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and other Asian countries.

Notwithstanding the economic sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation by the Collective West, the economic impact on Russia has not materialised as anticipated by the EU and NATO nations. As the war progressed, it became increasingly evident that the sanctions on Russia were working more against the Collective West and not significantly affecting Russia. After nearly 3 years since the beginning of the Russian Special Military Operation in the Ukraine, Zelenskyy is demanding an intensification of sanctions. This may be the last effort to sanction Russia further before Trump is inaugurated as the US President on January 20, 2025. The potential problem for the Collective West is that with his transaction approach to foreign policy, Trump may not see many benefits from further sanctioning Russia, as this may be at odds with his America First philosophy. Of course, the EU may impose economic sanctions on Russia irrespective of Trump's presidency. Still, if the US does not do the same, the Russian economy will not be exposed to further downturn.

However, after three years of war, the EU and the Biden administration's imposition of sanctions on Russia, beginning in February 2022, have not brought down the Russian regime, nor have these sanctions led to Russia's withdrawal of its armed forces from Ukraine. Russia has increased its defence budget to about six per cent of its GDP. Russia's economy is not in ruins, as some Western political commentators wish to claim. The problem in understanding the Russian economy in the West is that the analysis often begins with the question of how badly it is performing. The focus on searching for the failure of the Russian economy and an excessive reliance on confirmation partiality militates against the intellectual and academic rigour required to ascertain the reasons for the success or failure of sanctions.

Of course, Russia is experiencing some repercussions of sanctions on its economy and is confronting, in part, an uncertain economic future. For instance, its aviation and automotive manufacturing sectors are negatively impacted, with a decline of approximately 80 per cent, attributable to the absence of components from Western nations. Additionally, there is a notable lack of direct investment from the West, capital flight and a "brain drain". Collectively, these factors may contribute to enduring economic challenges in the foreseeable future. However, these problems are not even close to the outcomes projected by the Western alliance. Claims that the Russian economy is about to collapse are a political ploy to reassure the Western populations suffering from collateral sanction damage in their own countries, such as Germany, France, Austria, the UK and other EU countries, including increasing energy prices and worsening living standards.

In conclusion, the failure of EU and US sanctions against Russia mirrors, to a certain extent, a long sequence of sanctions failures levelled against Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, to name a few. Notwithstanding the possibility that sanctions may be useful as negotiating leverage, this is applicable in the current Russia-Ukraine War only if the West is prepared to lift them in return for a peace agreement. How far the Trump administration and the EU are prepared to lift sanctions and for which Russian concessions is currently not apparent. Indeed, at best, the Trump administration will maintain the current economic sanctions. At worst, it will impose additional ones. Depending on the concessions that Russia may agree to in return for a US-brokered peace agreement or freezing of hostilities, the Trump administration may lift some sanctions. How far the EU and the European NATO countries would follow suit is difficult to predict. For one, the governments of the UK, France, the Baltic states and others have committed themselves to support Ukraine 'for as long as it takes' and 'for as much as it takes', but may find it difficult to explain to their respective domestic audiences a policy reversal or softening concerning sanctions imposed on Russia. Be this as it may, the US and the EU must recognise the crucial lessons of modern

history and adjust their strategies regarding the sometimes inherently flawed approach of imposing economic sanctions on Russia.

5 Biden's Strategy Against Trump's Russo-Ukrainian War Politics

With the transition of power from the Biden to the Trump administration, the Russo-Ukrainian War is entering the aforementioned "twilight zone". To restate, as Biden's presidency draws to an end, his administration is trying to Trump-proof the aid to Ukraine and make implementing Trump's Ukraine political agenda as difficult as possible. In other words, the Biden administration is trying to leave behind an insoluble political mayhem for the incoming Trump administration. There is also evidence that the Biden administration is trying to lock the Trump administration into the Ukraine war - a forever war. An important point is that Biden's strategy regarding Ukraine is that the US should be explicitly involved in supporting the Zelenskyy regime.

In contrast, Trump's stance appears to be to remove the US from the war and push for negotiations between the two warring parties. With reference to Biden's Ukraine policies, it is important to note that the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, sees that any US weakening in its involvement in the war would create a vacuum. This political space would be filled by Russia and other countries, which are opposed to US interests. Notwithstanding the above, curiously, the Biden administration has, thus far, failed to articulate its "interests" in Ukraine beyond achieving an imminent collapse of Russia economically and militarily.

As Ash (2024) explains, unlike Biden, Trump does not appear to be explicitly interested in Ukraine. His mantra is 'America First', and he aims to stop the Russo-Ukrainian War as quickly as possible, regardless of which of the warring parties loses. Trump is interested in transforming the US into a transactional hegemon. However, as mentioned previously, the Biden administration is implementing policies and strategies that could potentially block the political aims of the incoming Trump administration. As it stands, US body politics is divided between Biden's globalist neoconservative and Trump's national populist ideologies. The former has strong support from the current NATO leadership, especially its Secretary General Mark Rutte.

With Trump returning to the presidency in January 2025, the approach of the Biden administration, the EU, and NATO leadership is curious. It appears that the Collective West (with some notable exceptions, like Hungary and Slovakia) is making every effort to force the incoming Trump administration into a situation where it cannot escape the predetermined path of the Biden-NATO-EU collective. To be sure, the Biden-NATO-EU alliance aims to ensure Russia's military, political and economic weakening, if not a collapse. However, as discussed previously, this is not likely to happen.

In the meantime, the Biden administration is providing Ukraine with every possible financial and military support before the Trump inauguration on January 20, 2025. Since Trump's re-election, this amounts to USD 2 billion in additional funds. To put this into context, since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the US has, in addition to humanitarian, financial and other aid, provided some USD 62 billion in military help to Ukraine. However, there are compelling conclusions to be drawn from Trump's statements that Ukraine will not receive the same amount of aid from the US - if any at all.

To disentangle Biden's strategies, it is interesting to observe that his administration is following an escalatory path, for example, by allowing Ukraine to strike deep into Russia using the ATACMS missiles. However, given the small number given to Ukraine, it is questionable which end effects these missiles may have. One argument is that this may put Ukraine in a better negotiation position. A more plausible explanation is that the supply of ATACMS and other military hardware to Ukraine will escalate the war and thus force Trump

to continue providing military aid to Ukraine from the beginning of his presidency. Notwithstanding the above considerations, Trump may assert that he can bring peace to Ukraine by forcing the warring parties to the negotiating table. However, he may have to face a war characterised by significantly escalated problems left behind by his predecessor, including an uncompromising Russia insisting on Ukraine's denouncement of NATO membership and recognition of the four oblasts (Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia) and Crimea as Russian territory and an inflexible Ukraine insisting on acceptance of Zelenskyy's *Victory Plan* as preconditions for peace negotiations.

6 Zelenskyy's *Victory Plan*

Zelenskyy's *Victory Plan* appears to be his response to the human, physical and territorial losses Ukraine is increasingly experiencing on the battlefield, a reaction to the increased pressure from the Collective West and war-fatigued Ukrainian population to negotiate a cease-fire. Curiously, Zelenskyy is not focussing on "peace" but on "victory". As it stands, any agreement with Russia would most likely be ruinous for Ukraine, which has thus far lost about 20 per cent of its territory. Being in danger of losing the war, despite the support from the Collective West, Ukraine is trying to pull NATO and the EU into the war. On numerous occasions, Zelenskyy has demanded fast-track entry into NATO and the EU. Thus far, NATO's invitation to Ukraine is not forthcoming, and it does not appear that it will be offered any time soon. Knowing this, Zelenskyy formulated his five-point *Victory Plan* and presented it to Biden, Harris, Trump, US Senators, the Ukraine Parliament and other EU and US politicians who were prepared to listen.

Briefly, Zelenskyy's *Victory Plan* contains five points and three secret appendices. The latter was not disclosed publicly. Point 1 is the demand by Ukraine to receive an invitation to join NATO; Point 2 is the demand by Ukraine to receive appropriate weapons and weapon systems and intelligence, including appropriate long-range missiles and lifting restrictions on the use of long-range missiles to target Russia's military facilities within Ukraine and Russia; Point 3 refers to Ukraine receiving funding from the Collective West to establishing a non-nuclear comprehensive strategic defence system within its borders appropriate to protect itself from any Russian military threats; Point 4 offers to the US and other specified Western partners such as the EU to enter into an exclusive agreement to protect Ukraine's vital resources, foster joint investment and the utilisation of pertinent economic possibilities; Point 5 addresses military post-Russo-Ukrainian War security whereby Ukraine offers, subject to a Collective West's agreement, to replace, with its own forces, specific US army units in Europe. The rationale is that Ukraine's military forces will be a formidable power to counter Russian aggression in the future (Strashkulych, 2024). A belief that these five points will gain traction within a majority of EU and NATO countries is delusional at best.

In other words, there is little evidence, if any, that Zelenskyy's *Victory Plan* received much support on the Western political stage (Melkozerova, 2024). To put it differently, Zelenskyy is currently struggling to gather support for his *Victory Plan*. By presenting this plan and seeking support from the Biden administration, US lawmakers, NATO, and others, Zelenskyy hoped to achieve his ultimate ambition, namely to obtain an invitation to join NATO and quick progress to EU membership. The problem with the plan is that, by Zelenskyy's own admission, the plan is not focused on pursuing peace but is a recipe for the escalation of the war. Even a cursory analysis of the five points makes it clear that Zelenskyy is not seeking peace negotiations or even a cease-fire but Russia's defeat on the battlefield. Despite months of lobbying for his *Victory Plan*, Zelenskyy has not successfully convinced the Collective West's leaders to support it (Murray, 2024). This puts Ukraine under pressure, especially since Trump appears to be noncommittal at best to provide aid for Ukraine.

7 Ukraine Under Pressure: Confronting Trump's Return

Zelenskyy is watching Trump's approach to the Russo-Ukrainian War with a certain amount of consternation. It is slowly becoming evident that Trump is inclined to demand peace negotiations to end the war. By now, Zelenskyy must know that if he agrees to negotiate while Russia is taking more Ukrainian territory, he will participate from a weakened position. Ukraine's situation on the battlefield is becoming increasingly alarming by the day. In order to secure continuing support from the US, Zelenskyy visited Trump in the US and met with him in Paris. Although it is difficult to second-guess Trump, who appears to keep his advice to himself, it is nevertheless interesting to observe his responses. For example, Trump has not publicly endorsed Zelenskyy's *Victory Plan*, but he has not rejected it either. In essence, nobody knows Trump's attitude towards Zelenskyy and the Russo-Ukrainian war – as yet. One thing is certain: Trump will do whatever he thinks is best for the US and it is difficult to identify what Ukraine can currently offer the US.

Notwithstanding the above, some indications concerning Trump's thinking are worth analysing based on Zelenskyy's attitude toward him. During his campaign, Trump stated that if elected, he would end the Russo-Ukrainian War within 24 hours. This led many critics to believe he could force Ukraine to concede defeat. However, this may be an overly pessimistic interpretation. Trump indicated that he wishes to end the war as quickly as possible. But he did not suggest in whose favour he would like the war to end. This means that Trump may well part from the Collective West's support for and commitment to Ukraine "for as long as it takes" and "whatever it takes".

There are three main issues to take into account. First, Trump's electoral victory has impacted the Russo-Ukrainian War even prior to him taking office on January 20, 2025. For example, some in the West argue for a ceasefire, such as Macron. Others, such as Orban, propose a peace agreement. A third group, represented by Starmer, Rutte, von der Leyen, and others, mainly from the Baltic states, propose to support Ukraine to win the war. Second, Trump has criticised Biden's policies concerning aid to Ukraine and has implied that he may reach an agreement with Putin. Third, and arguably most important, the Biden administration is distributing the remaining aid funds to Ukraine prior to Trump's inauguration (Baker, 2024). With reference to the last point Baker (2024: n.p.) states:

"President Joe Biden, a strong supporter of Ukraine, has sought to rush additional aid to Ukraine before Trump takes office. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said last week that Biden 'has committed to making sure that every dollar we have at our disposal will be pushed out the door' before that date in January."

In order to support Biden's strategy and to counteract any adverse Trump policies, NATO is taking over the distribution and administration of military aid to Ukraine (Reuters, 2024a). This strategy "...is designed to place Ukraine in a position of strength, which puts NATO in a position of strength to keep safe and prosperous its 1 billion people in both Europe and North America." (Cavoli cited in Vandiver, 2024). Be this as it may, it is difficult to imagine that Trump will agree to hand over the coordination of US aid funding for Ukraine to NATO or any other international organisation. In other words, the transfer of responsibility for coordinating aid from the US to NATO may have limited outcomes. Under the Trump administration, there is a possibility that the US will reduce funding, and the other NATO countries may find it challenging to cover a shortfall caused by the reduced US aid, if any. (Reuters, 2024b).

Against this background, it is interesting to observe that Zelenskyy is turning away from Trump and focusing on Biden. One reason may be that in his recent meetings with Trump in the US and Paris, Zelenskyy did not receive Trump's unconditional assurance of support,

which Biden and other Western leaders usually offer. Various Ukrainian newspapers, such as the *Ukrayinska Pravda* and *New Voice of Ukraine*, provide insights into Zelenskyy's policies, which, for a better understanding, are worth considering.

In response to Trump's ambiguity about the future of aid for Ukraine, Zelenskyy is pursuing a policy allowing him to gain NATO membership step-by-step. In an article in the *Ukrayinska Pravda* Balchuk (2024) reported that despite the fact that Ukraine is not a NATO member country, Zelenskyy is prepared to consider Macron's proposal to deploy Western military forces in Ukraine. However, according to Zelenskyy, this is conditional on Ukraine receiving an undertaking specifying when it will become a NATO and EU member country. Zelenskyy (cited in Balchuk, (2024: n.p.) stated:

“... we can think about and work on Emmanuel's position. Remember, he suggested that some of the forces of one country or another be stationed on specific Ukrainian territory to ensure security until Ukraine joins NATO.”

This may be interpreted as Trump giving Zelenskyy an understanding that the USA will not support Ukraine's NATO membership in the foreseeable future.

Not having Trump's support for Ukraine's NATO membership, Zelenskyy is turning to Biden for help. An article in the *Ukrayinska Pravda*, Pohorilov (2024: n.p.) cited Zelenskyy: "... I'm going to call President Biden in the near future if he has the opportunity to talk with me and raise the issue of an invitation to join NATO because he is now the current president of the United States and much depends on his position." This may well confirm the above-stated Trump's rejection of Ukraine to join NATO and Zelenskyy seeking support from the soon-to-be-replaced Biden administration. Furthermore, Zelenskyy stated that it is difficult to speak with Trump because he is president-elect and, as such, does not have the legal standing required to make such decisions. Thus, according to Zelenskyy (cited in Pohorilov (2024: n.p.), "...it makes no sense to discuss with President Trump that, while today he is not in the White House, it does not depend on him" (sic).

Notwithstanding the above, Trump will most likely exert pressure on Ukraine by negotiating with Zelenskyy and Putin (Shkarlat, 2024). He reconfirmed that Zelenskyy wants peace. However, it is unclear under which conditions such meetings would commence, and it is also unclear who Putin should negotiate with since Zelensky, with the Presidential decree from September 30, 2022, disqualified himself and Ukraine from participating in any negotiations with Putin (Klingert, 2022). This decree applies only to Putin, not Russia, per se. This makes the situation difficult for Trump to bring about negotiations. Unsurprisingly, Trump

“...criticised Volodymyr Zelensky and claimed the Ukrainian president refuses to make a deal amid Russia's war in Ukraine, marking Trump's most explicit criticism of Zelenskyy's handling of the war to date.” (Sullivan, et al., 2024: n.p.).

In conclusion, Trump has repeatedly stated that Volodymyr Zelenskyy is responsible for the Russo-Ukrainian War (Sentner, 2024). This contradicts the views of the EU and NATO leadership and most Western governments. It remains to be seen how these divergent views will affect the US relationship with NATO, the EU, and the Western political elite. Be this as it may, since the meeting of Trump, Macron, and Zelenskyy in Paris in December 2024, it has become increasingly evident that Ukraine will no longer be able to rely necessarily on US backing for its attacks deep into Russia, using the US supplied ATACMS missiles, and thus allegedly crossing a Russian Red Line.

8 Misinterpreting the Crossing of the Red Lines

Throughout the last three years of the Russo-Ukraine War, the West extensively speculated about what constitutes Russian Red lines. On several occasions, when it became evident that Russia would not react to Ukrainian battlefield actions as the West had anticipated, the West declared that Russia had crossed a Russian Red Line and that Putin was bluffing, allowing Ukraine to take military actions that may cross another Russian Red Line.

For example, whether the aforementioned Ukraine's deployment of ATACMS to strike deep into Russia is considered to be crossing its Red Line is debatable. Nevertheless, such actions are escalatory. It is also interesting to note that the West designates much of what constitutes Red Lines for Russia. Without acknowledging the deployment of ATACMS as crossing a Red Line, Russia responded by using its *Oreshnik* missile against a target in Ukraine. Without wanting to labour this point, it should suffice to point out that Russia is avoiding being forced to set Red Lines. There are two exceptions; namely, Russia has set as a Red Line NATO's direct overt involvement in the war and Ukraine joining NATO. The West is aware of this and will try to avoid an escalation. Attacks by Ukraine on Russian facilities and infrastructure using ATACMS may be considered by Russia as crossing a Red Line, which would cause it to retaliate within and beyond Ukraine. There are many other examples; however, what Russia considers as Red Lines is little known in the West.

For the West, the question is how to balance support for Ukraine against escalations that may cross Russian Red Lines. However, there is no clear answer because, as noted above, thus far, Russia has not publicly declared what it considers a Red Line, and the West is in doubt. In the end, only Russia can determine its Red Lines. Despite this, the West fails to focus on the dynamics of Russia's military strategies and thus often draws illogical conclusions that either exaggerate or belittle Russian readiness to retaliate (Episkopos, 2024). If anything, Russia's seeming hesitance to respond to the West's operational involvement in Ukraine has contributed to a perception amongst Western politicians and political analysts that Russian Red Lines are simply psychological strategies aimed at deterring the West from providing aid to Ukraine. Undefined, imaginary and shifting Russian Red Lines, as perceived by the West and as opposed to those which respond to existential threats, contribute little, if anything, to understanding Russia's war strategies.

Be that as it may, with or without announcing any of its Red Lines, Russia, in keeping with the incoming Trump administration, will potentially steer the conflict towards an outcome that satisfies Russia's core interests by shaping the resolution to end the war, whether through a negotiated settlement, or frozen conflict, or even on the battlefield and Ukraine's capitulation. By keeping uncertainties about its Red Lines, Putin is able to adjust Russia's strategies and respond to changing geopolitical circumstances. This is in stark contrast to Zelenskyy's stance rejecting freezing the conflict and entering into peace negotiations. Given that Trump is interested in ending the Russo-Ukrainian War as quickly as possible and that Russia's Red Lines do not militate against unconditional negotiations or freezing the conflict, Russia's position, according to Bolton (2024), Trump's former security adviser, would be more acceptable to Trump than the above-mentioned Ukrainian stance.

9 A Speculative Assessment of Trump's Way Forward

Trump has recognised that bringing Putin and Zelenskyy together to negotiate will not be easy. At the same time, he does not wish to carry on the legacy of Biden and NATO. In Trump's view, the Russo-Ukrainian War is Biden's conflict, claiming it would not happen under his presidency. This means that Trump does not care who loses or wins in the war as long as it ends. Since Russia is in a stronger position militarily, Ukraine is at a disadvantage.

The problem for Ukraine is that if the Trump administration adopts a strategy of weakened support for Ukraine, NATO and the EU will, however, reluctantly follow, especially if Trump demands that NATO members increase their respective defence budget to five per cent of their GDP.

To be sure, Zelenskyy must be aware that Trump may reduce, if not withdraw, military aid to Ukraine. In such a case, Ukraine's only option for its security is NATO membership, which, as argued above, is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. Another critical question is whether Trump will pull the US out of NATO. Of course, another option for Trump is to keep the US in NATO but reduce its monetary commitments to the alliance. In this case, the argument is that the Russo-Ukrainian War is a European conflict and has nothing to do with the US. In transactional terms, Trump sees the US as spending resources on defending Europe without a reciprocal benefit.

Thus, Ukraine faces two risks. On the one hand, Trump and Putin could reach an agreement without Zelenskyy's participation. This may be especially the case if Zelenskyy insists on preconditions for negotiations, such as acceptance of his *Victory Plan* and his inflexibility to compromise. On the other hand, given Trump's quest for a quick ending of the war, Putin may extract concessions from Trump, which in turn could divide the Western alliance and reduce the support for Ukraine. In this context, and however speculative, it is not beyond the realm of imagination that Trump and Putin reach an agreement for the US to minimise or end military and financial assistance to Ukraine. In return, Putin would agree to a cease-fire to end hostilities and accept freezing the conflict along the lines of conflict. This could allow for the establishment of a demilitarised zone.

The crux of the outcome is Putin's confidence that Russia is winning militarily. Yet he is also aware of the fact that the war is expensive and is progressing slowly. At the same time, it is evident that Ukraine is becoming correspondingly weaker. Thus, Putin may question why he should agree to a deal with Trump when he can gain more through successful military actions. After all, the more Ukrainian territory Russia gains, the stronger its future bargaining position will be. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that Trump and Putin could not reach an agreement without NATO, the EU, and Ukraine's participation. Given that Trump has seemingly little interest in Ukraine's future unless it benefits the US, reaching a 'deal' with Putin could show Trump on the global stage as a strong and successful negotiator and leave Ukraine in a no-win –political twilight - position.

Furthermore, if the US recognises the annexed Ukrainian territories as formally part of the Russian Federation but European countries do not follow suit, the situation will become a legal twilight zone. Thus, as discussed above, deals would not necessarily end the war if Ukraine decides to continue or reopen military actions to retrieve the territory annexed by Russia at a later stage.

10 Conclusion: Ukraine in the Twilight Zone

In conclusion, it could be argued that the Collective West, despite its rhetoric of solidarity with Ukraine, has largely failed to formulate, facilitate or execute a coherent strategy to end the Russo-Ukrainian War. Instead of steering the conflict toward a mutually acceptable resolution, Western policies have pushed Ukraine deeper into a quagmire—militarily, politically, and economically. At the same time, Ukraine's efforts to drag the West, particularly NATO and EU member countries, directly into the war have met mostly with resistance, highlighting a widening gulf in strategic objectives between Ukraine and the Collective West.

As the Biden administration is on its way out, the question is whether President Biden will escalate the conflict in a manner that complicates or outright sabotages the incoming

Trump administration's stated intent to pursue peace negotiations. The possibility that Biden will take steps that would lock the US—and, by extension, NATO—into a prolonged commitment to Ukraine's "forever war" cannot be ruled out. Such actions could severely constrain Trump's ability to turn toward diplomacy, a move that he and Vice President-elect J.D. Vance have identified as a cornerstone of their foreign policy approach vis-à-vis Ukraine. This contrasts with the policies of the Biden administration, which is marred by a lack of effective diplomacy, thereby prioritising military escalation over meaningful and constructive negotiations. By designating the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as an existential, zero-sum game, the Biden administration has contributed to the deepening impasse. NATO and the EU, largely following Washington's lead, appear committed to a proxy war of attrition rather than exploring viable pathways to de-escalation.

In stark contrast, Trump's approach suggests a significant departure from the current US strategy regarding the Russo-Ukrainian War. His administration appears poised to seek direct dialogue with Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vladimir Putin, aiming at a negotiated settlement. Early indicators suggest that Trump's strategy might involve concessions, such as Ukraine ceding territory to Russia. While such a proposal would undoubtedly provoke controversy, especially among the European members of the Collective West, it reflects a pragmatic shift toward ending the conflict. If Trump pursues a strategy involving territorial compromise, the broader implications for Western unity could be problematic. The European public, already grappling with the economic fallout from the war, may find it difficult to justify continued aid to Ukraine under these terms. On the other hand, an arrangement that allows Russia to retain its current territorial gains would likely change the dynamics of the conflict and challenge NATO's long-standing narrative of steadfast support for Ukraine's sovereignty.

To be sure, the probability of a Trump-led peace initiative has exposed rifts within the Western alliance. For Ukraine, Trump's victory signals a potential reduction in US military and economic support at a time when the country is already losing ground—both militarily, diplomatically and economically. For example, in 2024, congressional Republicans blocked a significant aid package for Ukraine, illustrating growing US domestic resistance to unlimited involvement. Although the package was later approved, the episode underscores the fragile nature of bipartisan support for Ukraine within the US Congress. Also, two EU cum NATO countries, Hungary and Slovakia, are blocking military aid to Ukraine. In the meantime, NATO and the EU leadership in Brussels are scrambling to sustain aid for Ukraine, even exploring the possibility of doing so independently of US participation. This marks a significant shift in the dynamics of the Western alliance (Jakupec, 2024), as EU and NATO leaders face two related challenges: maintaining solidarity while addressing growing war fatigue among their populations.

With the advent of the Trump administration, the Russo-Ukrainian War has entered a political, military, and diplomatic "twilight zone". Biden's legacy of a fragmented and reactive foreign policy leaves Trump facing complex problems with unresolved issues. While Trump's willingness to engage in direct diplomacy offers hope for de-escalation, the path to peace remains uncertain. Whether the Trump administration can successfully navigate these challenges depends on its diplomatic acumen and the willingness of NATO and EU leaders to adapt to a shifting geopolitical reality. The next chapter of the Russo-Ukrainian War will hinge on whether the Western Alliance can reconcile its internal divisions and redefine its approach—or whether it will remain caught up and overly involved in a proxy war of attrition.

To conclude and to restate, there are compelling arguments to be made that at the end of the third year of the Russo-Ukrainian War, Ukraine is entering a geopolitical and strategic "twilight zone". It has to navigate two critical, if not insurmountable, challenges: the

continued Russian advance on the battlefield and the evolving international dynamics of the conflict. The latter depends to a large extent on incoming president Trump's proposed ideas for peace, which may bring about a potential shift in Western support. The interaction of these two factors will determine Ukraine's trajectory as it navigates its future on the margin of geopolitical transformation and survival.

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