



**Joining the dots and making sense of the key geopolitical developments in Europe, Eurasia and MENA**

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**Geopolitical Trends (Re-)Emerging from the return of Donald Trump at the White House:**

**Key points:**

1. What possible geopolitical endgames of the war in Ukraine?
  2. Upheaval in the Middle East: Iran's shifting security paradigms.
  3. Is the Black Sea shifting into a *de facto* buffer zone between NATO/the West and Russia?
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On November 5, 2024, Donald Trump was elected as the 47<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025, he will return to the White House after four years of Democratic hiatus, impersonated by president Joe Biden. On the campaign trail, president-elect D. Trump vowed to end Russia's invasion of Ukraine before taking office, halve energy prices within a year and bring peace to the Middle East. He promised transformational changes, pledging to upend global alliances and commerce, deport immigrants on a massive scale, enact huge new tariffs, cut taxes and make the federal government smaller and more responsive to his agenda. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>).

During his first tenure at the White House (2017-2020) D. Trump's foreign and security policy was shaped around the following tenets: the U.S. global leadership promoted by his predecessors was not cost-effective for America; the system of alliances and partnerships just burdened the American budget and failed to provide the same strategic, economic, and geopolitical output they used to throughout the second half of the 20th century; multilateralism and international organizations and agreements uselessly constrained American power, and implicitly its freedom to exert it at the global and regional levels; issue-oriented ad-hoc, temporary arrangements were more profitable in meeting U.S.

national interests; there were a number of states, including allies and partners, but also adversaries, like China and Russia, who took unfair advantage of American benign hegemony in the post-Cold War era, and they should be powerfully pushed back.

Against this backdrop and having in mind the ongoing structural changes of the world order over the last decade, we'll focus the next issues on geopolitical trends (re-)emerging from D. Trump's return to the White House.

### 1) What possible geopolitical endgames of the war in Ukraine?

In his electoral campaign, president-elect D. Trump famously promised he would "finish the war in Ukraine in 24 hours" by merely talking to presidents V. Putin and V. Zelenski. Obviously, that was an exaggeration meant to convey his strong political message that this war must stop as soon as possible. At the same time, vice-president-elect J.D. Vance suggested that a negotiated settlement would require Ukraine's neutrality, the freezing of the front line and the establishment of a heavily fortified demilitarized zone, meaning either establishing some kind of international peacekeeping force between the two armies, or building a Ukrainian military sufficient on its own to repel a possible future Russian attack. In his thinking, this would

preserve Ukraine's independence and sovereignty over the territory it controls and would prevent further Russian invasions. Such talk has triggered a broad international debate on the imminent start of negotiations between Russia and Ukraine over how to stop their more than 1000 days-long war as soon as president D. Trump returned to the White House. Most recently, international media have reported that his transition team has been discussing elements of a "peace plan" for the Russia-Ukraine war. One proposed idea would involve Kyiv promising not to join NATO for at least 20 years in exchange for U.S. weapons to deter a future Russian attack. Another idea proposed an 800-mile (1,287-kilometer) demilitarized zone with European states taking on the peacekeepers' role. (<https://ranenetwork.com>) Against this backdrop, reviewing possible endgames of the war in Ukraine and how to reach them might be most relevant.

In our [Issue 21/ November 2022- February 2023](#), we have already covered several hypothetical proposals for ceasing the war in Ukraine: "Ukraine's victory/Russian full defeat"; "Kyiv Security Compact" providing for post-war bilateral security guarantees from willing NATO states; "Berlin-Wall scenario"- whereby NATO and Russia defended a stable separation line; "Korean scenario"- an armistice without peace treaty upheld by NATO forces deployed in Ukraine; deployment of "international/NATO peacekeepers" in a buffer zone separating Ukrainian and Russian forces; "Neutral Ukraine"/"Istanbul agreement" referring the peace agreement initialled, but not signed, by the parties in end March 2022. At the time, we had reached the conclusion that: *"Turning the war into a protracted conflict might be the likeliest geopolitical endgame, at least until there was broad agreement on the framework and main rules of interaction into a new European security system."* This conclusion is still valid, despite of the war escalation, and its deepening entanglement with the global confrontation for power.

Over the last couple of years, the war has continuously escalated, and it gradually turned into a grinding war of attrition with slight moves of the frontlines, until August 2024, when Ukraine surprisingly invaded the Russian region of Kursk. That operational strike aimed at diverting some of the Russian attacking forces in Donbas by creating a new frontline, and using the newly conquered Russian territory as a bargaining chip for getting back some of the Ukrainian territories captured and annexed in autumn 2022 by Russia.

Eventually, the Kursk incursion proved to be a destabilizing factor of the Eastern front as it led, besides the other military shortcomings hindering the effective operation of Ukrainian armed forces discussed in [Issue 24/ November 2023-February 2024](#), to more effective Russian offensives in Ukrainian territory, while also having Ukrainian forces pushed back from parts of the areas taken in Kursk.

According to open sources, *"Russia is currently enjoying a tactical advantage on the battlefield and has captured six-times more territory in 2024 than in all of 2023, according to the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). [...] The pace of these advances has accelerated in recent months, with over 1,000 square kilometres taken between September 1 and November 3 alone, the ISW reports, as cited by the BBC."* Meanwhile, in the Russian region of Kursk, *"Ukrainian forces seized just over 1,171 square kilometres", and "since October, the Russian forces have retaken nearly half of that territory (i.e. 593 square kilometres according to ISW figures)"* (<https://intellinews.com>).

From a Ukrainian perspective, this recent military dynamic has created an adverse backdrop for negotiations with Russia conflicting with D. Trump's electoral campaign calls for a quick settlement of the war in Ukraine. In response, president Zelenski came up in October 2024 with the so-called "Victory Plan" aiming to strengthen Ukraine's position enough on the battlefield to "force" Russia to negotiate an end

to the war. However, much of that plan would have hinged on increased Western support, which was why many in the West had received it with a cold shoulder. As R. Haas has put it in a recent article on “The Perfect Has Become the Enemy of the Good in Ukraine”: *“It offers no realistic strategy that Ukraine’s partners can support. It is not a plan for victory, but a prescription for continued war. If Kyiv’s allies walk away, it could end up being a prescription for defeat.”* (<https://foreignaffairs.com>)

Where do all those recent developments lead the possible geopolitical endgames of the war in Ukraine?

Most experts agreed that the hopes for “Ukraine’s victory” would remain unfulfilled, which basically means that a return to the 1991 borders of Ukraine was no longer feasible, at least in the foreseeable future. *“More and more we hear in Washington and Europe that Kyiv is unreasonable to expect to regain 100 percent of its territory, and the Ukrainians are beginning to get their heads around it. [...] There is a world where they concede Russian occupation for some time”* said C. Grand, a former NATO assistant secretary general and defence expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations who just visited Ukraine. (<https://nytimes.com>)

On the other hand, in Ukraine, there is a temptation to blame the often late and insufficient Western aid for justifying this loss. However, scapegoating the West for territorial losses would be both unfair and counterproductive for Ukraine’s independent future. In our past issues, we have repeatedly brought up arguments showing that Ukraine’s war objectives and strategies have been highly unrealistic, and the gradual death of this geopolitical endgame should not have taken anyone by surprise.

In contrast, there are many who are now fearing of a new geopolitical endgame: “Ukraine’s collapse leading into Western direct clash with Russia”. *“It is abundantly clear that the present course is unsustainable, and if persisted in, is likely to lead*

*sooner or later either to Ukrainian collapse or to direct NATO involvement in war with Russia.”* (A. Lieven on <https://thenation.com>) T. Snider has also thought that *“The current seemingly irreversible trajectory suggests that Ukraine has lost the semi-proxy war. [...] Zelensky is arguing that “this war is internationalized and goes beyond the borders” of Ukraine. [...] The insertion of North Korean troops could be used to do what the Victory Plan could not: draw in Western troops or at least allow the firing of Western long-range missiles into areas of Russia hosting North Korean troops”* (<https://antiwar.com>). The latest escalation towards a NATO-Russia nuclear war, enshrined in Russian changes of its nuclear doctrine and launch on November 22, 2024, of a nuclear-capable IRBM (Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile) “Oreshnik” against the Ukrainian city of Dnipro, allegedly in response to US and UK authorization of Ukrainian missiles attacks against targets deeper in Russia, is raising drastically the probability of this endgame. *“NATO is unable to determine the target or whether or not an IRBM launched at Ukraine is armed with a nuclear warhead ahead of time, so the move is intended to increase strategic nuclear threats to NATO states and thereby deter them from increasing support to Ukraine in the future.”* (<https://ranenetwork.com>) In our [Issue 24/ November 2023-February 2024](#) we have also warned on the increasing possibility of an emerging new crisis in European affairs: *“Apparently, Europe is facing a crucial security dilemma ensuing from its higher military dependence on the US, distrust of Russia, and reluctance to negotiate on building a new European security architecture: it should either escalate the war with Russia or lose (at least much of) Ukraine at its own peril. Such evolutions could portend a fresh crisis in European affairs.”*

Between those two extreme endgames there is a wide range of variations of the older geopolitical endgames of the war in Ukraine. They straddle over various versions of the “Korean scenario”, “international peacekeepers deployed in a buffer

zone”, and “neutral Ukraine/ Istanbul + agreement”. The key variables determining those variations are the following:

- Ceasefire/armistice or legally certified long-term peace.
- The security status of Ukraine, i.e. NATO membership/ NATO countries’ security guarantees or neutral, lightly armed Ukraine.
- Temporary or definitive arrangements for the territories of Ukraine annexed by Russia, including Crimea.

While D. Trump’s position is not fully clear yet, his transition team has considered a couple of the possible endgames presented before. From his perspective, the outcomes of any acceptable endgame should involve minimal US commitments, except for plenty of arms’ sales to both Europeans and Ukrainians; a maximum engagement of European NATO allies and of the EU in guaranteeing Ukrainian independence and sovereignty over its rump territory, and in re-building Ukrainian destroyed infrastructure, and sinking economy.

On the other hand, president V. Putin has re-iterated several times Russian position about ending (not merely suspending) the war in Ukraine. He would like to restart the March 2022 Istanbul peace deal, which means Ukraine giving up land, reducing its military significantly, and maintaining a neutral status. Since, in fall 2022, Russia annexed four more regions of Ukraine (Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporozhe, and Kherson), besides Crimea, the Istanbul+ agreement should include agreements on their statuses too. In Russian view, all negotiations should start with an “*iron-clad legally binding*” guarantee that Ukraine will never join NATO. Ukraine should also dramatically reduce the size of its armed forces, and Kyiv should drop the laws constricting the use of the Russian language, while Russian should be made an official language; additionally, Moscow insists that security guarantees for Ukraine should also cover Russia to avoid direct conflicts between Russia and

the West in the future. Moscow has also made clear that there would be no negotiations until Ukrainian troops were ousted from Russia’s Kursk region. (<https://intellinews.com>)

Meanwhile, the position of president V. Zelenski of Ukraine is shifting under the trilateral pressure from: the degrading military situation on the frontlines, D. Trump’s insistence on immediately ceasing the war, and a shifting public opinion mood (latest Gallup polls indicated that more than half of Ukrainians would agree with a negotiated deal with Russia involving some territorial losses for Ukraine). Mr. Zelenski has been appealing for support from the U.S. and the European states for what he called a “*peace through strength strategy*” that should shore up Ukraine’s army, and potentially improve its position on the battlefield before peace talks commenced. He reiterated his call for an invitation for NATO membership or that NATO states provide Ukraine with hard security guarantees, and a continued massive flow of Western weapons to buttress Ukrainian defences. He has also called for a Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian occupied territories (lately, he accepted that the status of Crimea could be dealt with by diplomatic means, over the longer-term though), no peace treaty, but merely a ceasefire agreement should be enacted. His preference for some sort of a “*Korean scenario*”-style endgame is rather blatant.

In conclusion, Russia and Ukraine are still hanging on to conflicting positions over the possible geopolitical endgames of the war in Ukraine. That makes reaching an armistice, let aside a full-fledged peace treaty, a Sisyphean task. Most experts agreed that a glimmer of realism in Ukraine’s war strategy might open the door to ceasefire negotiations, as the time is clearly running against Kyiv’s fundamental interests and goals. However, any post-conflict security guarantees for Ukraine will be bound to rely on a Russia-West agreement over new European security arrangements. This is why, diplomacy to

move closer to a mutually acceptable solution should take place in at least three phases: 1) identifying and setting up mutually acceptable parameters for a ceasefire; 2) agreeing on a wider European security framework underpinning the terms of a future peace plan; 3) negotiating and concluding a Russia-Ukraine peace deal able to accommodate the new post-war geopolitical realities. This three-steps peace process should be mediated by international brokers which were acceptable for both Russia and Ukraine, as well as for the Western stakeholders, while considering the deepening entanglement of this war with the global confrontation between the West and the China- Russia- Iran- North Korea revisionist quartet (for details on the latter see [Issue 25/ March-June 2024](#)).

Conversely, any NATO/European military deployment to Ukraine as security guarantee against further Russian aggression would be seen in Moscow as part of perceived Western "aggressive" plans that had led to triggering the war in the first place. It should therefore be somehow balanced by some sort of security guarantees for Russia itself, such as Western statements on the temporary and conditional character of those deployments, or the setting up of a mechanism ensuring that Western security guarantees for Ukraine would be adjusted to Russia's claims for indivisible security. Otherwise, the war would continue to escalate dramatically, and peace would become contingent to the full capitulation of the first exhausted party. And the likeliest is that Ukraine might founder first.

## 2) Upheaval in the Middle East: Iran's shifting security paradigms.

In our [Issue 24/November 2023-February 2024](#), we concluded that, despite the ongoing war in Gaza triggered by the Hamas surprise attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, regional war in the Middle East wasn't imminent, at least not in 2024. None of the key players have been interested or capable to fill in the existing "power vacuum" left by U.S. "pivot to

Asia" since 2011. However, as expected, in 2024 Israel has repeatedly struck against Iran's *Axis of Resistance* causing serious blows to Hamas, Hezbollah and to Iran itself. Last September, Israel has expanded the Gaza war by invading the South Lebanon and bombing Beirut and other Hezbollah strongholds. Nevertheless, U.S. muscular diplomatic intervention, Teheran's military restraint in responding those blows, and Hamas and Hezbollah's limited military capabilities to defend, and strike back effectively against Israeli attacks have prevented a dramatic escalation to a wider regional war.

What has motivated Iran's military restraint in 2024, and is it likely to endure after the return at the White House, in January 2025, of president-elect D. Trump? Trump is known for having withdrawn the U.S. from the nuclear deal with Iran and for applying "maximum pressure" by imposing several new non-nuclear sanctions against Iran. His aim, unsuccessfully pursued also by president J. Biden, has been to renegotiate the [JCPOA](#) by adding more restrictions on Iran's nuclear program and expanding the scope of the agreement to cover Iran's ballistic missiles as well as other regional activities.

The answers could be structured on two levels:

1. Domestic concerns in Iran leading to political changes in the wake of the July 2024 presidential elections.
2. Israel's strategic blows to Iran's Forward Defence and the ensuing security dilemmas in Teheran.

### 1. Iran's Changing Domestic and Foreign Policies

In July 2024, Masoud Pezeshkian, has been elected Iran's ninth president after a snap election in which he has prevailed over five conservative contenders. He succeeded E. Raisi, the hardliner president who died in a helicopter crash on May 19, 2024. The results of this election have proved that there still is a moderate drive for domestic reforms in Iran, which

has been confronted with serious socio-economic challenges over the last years. Nevertheless, M. Pezeshkian had been vetted by the Guardian Council (the body in charge of vetoing unwanted candidates), as in the political debates he has often pledged loyalty to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah A. Khamenei and never called into question the continuity of Iran's political system.

Pezeshkian had pledged to bridge the "gap" between the people and the government. *"I will do everything possible to look at those who were not seen by the powerful and whose voices are not heard. We will make poverty, discrimination, war, lies and corruption disappear from this country,"* he said at a rally. He expressed support for greater transparency in the banking and financial sectors, including by implementing measures that would allow Iran's removal from a blacklist of the Financial Action Task Force, a global watchdog for money laundering and terrorist financing. (<https://washingtonpost.com>)

On foreign policy, president M. Pezeshkian has focused on the need to engage with the West, including on the nuclear issue, to get sanctions relief and improve the economic conditions, as well as to move away from the brink of regional war. He also praised his predecessor's *rapprochement* with Arab countries, signalling that, in issues other than ties with the West, he is largely determined to continue the policies of the previous Iranian president. (<https://www.chathamhouse.org>)

In a recent article, M. Javad Zarif outlined the vision behind the newest twist of Iranian foreign policy: *"Pezeshkian recognizes that the world is transitioning into a post-polar era where global actors can simultaneously cooperate and compete across different areas. He has adopted a flexible foreign policy, prioritizing diplomatic engagement and constructive dialogue rather than relying on outdated paradigms."* He further explained that Iran will pursue economic integration, energy security,

freedom of navigation, environmental protection, and interfaith dialogue. The aim would be to create a new regional arrangement that reduced the Persian Gulf's reliance on external powers and encouraged stakeholders to resolve conflicts rather than fight against each other. *"The Arab world, after all, is united with Iran in its support for restoring the rights of the Palestinian people"*, which is an arrow thrown against the Abraham Accords signed by Israel with several Arab monarchies, initiated by president D. Trump in his first mandate. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com>)

## 2. Israel's Blows to Hamas and Hezbollah Create New Security Dilemmas for Iran

Iran's threat against Israel rested on two primary pillars: its extensive drone and missile arsenal and the capabilities of its proxy forces, particularly Hezbollah in Lebanon. This strategy, known as Iran's *forward defence* doctrine, sought to project power and deter adversaries beyond its borders without direct confrontation. Once a cornerstone of Iranian influence in the region, *forward defence* has come under severe strain due to the attrition of Hamas and Hezbollah by Israel over the last 14 months, and its air strikes' apparent failure to alter Israeli strategic calculus. (<https://carnegieendowment.org>)

On April 1, 2024, an Israeli airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus killed seven Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commanders, including two generals. Two weeks later, Iran retaliated with a barrage of drones and missiles, almost all of which were intercepted by Israel with help from the U.S. and its regional allies. By launching hundreds of drones and missiles at Israel, Iran aimed to make clear that it would no longer practice *"strategic patience"* and henceforth would respond when attacked. However, the strategic intention was to rebuild deterrence by demonstrating its willingness and ability to strike Israel directly, rather than provoke a wider regional war. That was the case,

since Iranians knew that a wider regional war would quickly draw in the U.S. while compelling Washington to abandon its plans to reduce its military footprint in the Middle East.

Following the explosion of pagers and walkie-talkies in use by Hezbollah engineered by Israel, and the assassination of a few top leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, including I. Haniyeh and H. Nasrallah, on October 1, 2024, Iran executed a second major air attack against Israeli military objectives. Despite using its most advanced ballistic missiles, the damage to Israeli military infrastructure was minimal. The intention was again to respond Israeli strikes against its proxies, as well as against its generals, without triggering a wider regional war. However, the ensuing geopolitical realities for Iran were harsh. A recent expert assessment concluded that: *“Tehran’s continued inability to deter Israeli actions effectively or protect its key proxies such as Hezbollah will weaken Iran’s position within the region and raise questions about the long-term viability of its forward defence strategy”*. (N Grajewski- *“Iran Is at a Strategic Crossroads”*, <https://carnegieendowment.org>)

The fall on December 8, 2024, of the B. Al-Assad regime in Syria has been another blow to Iran’s *forward defence* doctrine. This was the case not only since the former Syrian leader had been a close and steady ally of Iran, but for he had also facilitated the crossing of Iranian weapons and ammunitions to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Although it’s unknown yet how the Syrian rebels who had overthrown Al-Assad from power would deal with Teheran and its proxies from neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon they might likely hardly forget the Iranian prop-up to the Syrian regime over the last 13 years.

In that context, and aware of the deteriorating strategic balance with Israel, Iranian leaders might increasingly view the nuclear potential as a critical component of a broader security strategy. Iranian

Parliament would have discussed in October 2024 the nuclear doctrine with some arguing for developing nuclear weapons. While Western experts thought that *“the regime in Tehran appears to be concluding that possessing nuclear weapons is essential to its survival, for both external and domestic reasons. [...] public opinion is turning in favour of developing nuclear weapons after decades of opposition”* (C.E.B Choksy and J. K. Choksy- *“Iran’s Nuclear Tipping Point”* on <https://foreignaffairs.com>) There are no clear proofs yet that a political decision to weaponize Iranian nuclear capabilities has been made. However, as efforts to conclude a nuclear deal between U.S. and Iran remained fruitless, and Teheran continued to fail in changing Israeli strategic calculations, the risk that Iran would build nuclear weapons is growing.

Obviously, those developments have come in stark contrast to president’s M. Pezeshkian’s efforts to engage with the West, and the U.S. in particular, on concluding a new nuclear deal. According to senior Iranian officials, Iran was open to negotiations with the Trump administration to resolve all nuclear and regional issues. This is a shift from Iran’s position during the first Trump administration that it would not negotiate with Washington and that its regional policies and weapons development were strictly its own business: *“Iran is now applying restraint to give Trump a chance to see whether he can end the Gaza war and contain Netanyahu. [...] If this happens, it will open the path for more comprehensive negotiations between Tehran and Washington”* said S. Hossein Mousavian, a former Iranian diplomat and nuclear negotiator. (<https://nytimes.com>)

In fact, as suggested by a former Iranian vice-president, M. Ali Abtahi, at this time, there would be two competing strategies discussed in Iran’s policy circles. One would call for Iran to proceed defiantly and strengthen its proxy militias in the Middle East to deter the U.S. and Israel. Weaponizing the Iranian nuclear program might be the trump card of this

hard-line strategy. The other would call for negotiating with Mr. Trump, which would be gaining traction among some conservatives, largely because they didn't see an alternative for resolving Iran's economic problems. How to square a deal with president D. Trump that would not look like an Iranian defeat is the key challenge facing this pragmatic strategy. (<https://nytimes.com>)

In conclusion, Iran has signalled that it would be ready to compromise with the incoming Trump Administration on a broad range of regional security issues, including sanctions' relief against accepting negotiated limits and external control over its nuclear and ballistic missiles programmes, and its continued support for the Axis of Resistance. However, Iranian leaders have also made it crystal clear that they would be hardly ready to capitulate on all issues, let aside admitting defeat against Israel and the U.S. The new Iranian president has extended an olive branch to his U.S. and Western counterparts, but it's not clear yet whether D. Trump would be willing and able to accept it. A key part of a possible Iran-U.S. regional deal for the Middle East would require U.S. ability to restrain Israeli Prime-Minister B. Netanyahu's determination to significantly curtail Iranian regional influence. However, Mr. Trump owes his re-election partly to the havoc created in the Democratic Party and among its supporters by Mr Netanyahu's intransigent, excessively brutal approach to the war in Gaza, and the conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon. As such, it's highly unlikely that president D. Trump would be willing to force the hard-line Israeli leaders to accept anything less than a benign Iran in a Middle East fully aligned with Israeli security and territorial interests.

On the other hand, the latest Israeli blows to Iran's *forward defence* doctrine have created a new security dilemma for Iran: either it responds forcefully to Israel's challenges, or it may lose credibility as a key security actor in the Middle East.

At the extreme, this new Iranian security dilemma might lead Teheran to creating its own nuclear deterrent. In addition, the ongoing upheaval in the Middle East is highlighting older dilemmas of Iranian regional policy: how to dominate the region while maintaining good neighbourly relations with its Arab neighbours. This is why it is likely that, as long as it maintained its current foreign policy unaltered, Iran would continue to get closer to Russia, and China, would favour cooperation over competition with its Arab neighbours, while dealing carefully with the U.S./ West, and reluctantly with Israel.

### **3) Is the Black Sea shifting into a *de facto* buffer zone between NATO/the West and Russia?**

In [Issue 19/ May-July 2022](#) we had noted that, in the wake of Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Wider Black Sea (WBS) regional balance of power was in flux. This didn't change much over the last couple of years: the Northern seashore is still largely controlled by Russia, while the land is disputed by Russian and Ukrainian armed forces; NATO has bolstered its positions and control of the West; Turkiye is in the South and controls the Black Sea Straits; Russia, Turkiye, and Iran continue to share power in the East (South Caucasus) while Western influence is fading. That situation has been partly the result of president J. Biden's policy to transform the WBS region into a platform for U.S. strategic re-engagement with Eastern Europe, mostly in geopolitical and military terms. President V. Putin of Russia had over-reacted against J. Biden's moves in the region by invading Ukraine in February 2022.

The advent of D. Trump at the White House, as of January 20, 2025, might reduce the level of U.S. engagement in the WBS, while potentially reverting it to greater geopolitical stability. However, several other key factors would likely determine the nature and level of WBS geopolitical stability in 2025 and beyond. The outcome of the ongoing war in Ukraine is by far the most consequential variable (see item #1 for details). Potential shifts in Turkiye's multi-vector

## Bulgaria, Moldova &amp; Georgia



foreign policy and their impact on the Russian-Turkish strategic partnership would account for another key factor. Recent developments in domestic politics of several WBS countries, most notably in Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, and Romania might also have an impact on their geopolitical choices, and consequently on the WBS's evolving geopolitical dynamics. Finally, external factors, such as the changing levels of engagement of NATO, EU, and China with the region, might also affect geopolitical shifts in the WBS.

During his first term at the White House, president D. Trump has largely neglected the WBS. In his latest electoral campaign, he expressed an interest for bringing to an immediate end the war in Ukraine, while re-iterating his determination to significantly retrench U.S. involvement in European security affairs. As outlined in an [EGF op-ed](#) published six years ago, president D. Trump might be tempted to applying the *indirect warfare strategy* to various regions of the world, including Europe. This strategy was proposed by George Friedman, a self-declared NATO- and EU-sceptic (just like president-elect Trump), which would combine economy of force and finance, and would limit the development of Russia

and Germany as regional hegemonic powers, while exposing the U.S. to limited and controlled risk. The key element of that strategy in Eastern Europe would consist of an *Inter-Marium Alliance*<sup>1</sup>, consisting of countries on the Estonia to Azerbaijan line, which shared the primary interest of retaining their sovereignty, and the danger that the eventual fate of Ukraine could spread and directly affect their national security interests, including their internal stability. This “*informal alliance*” of states from the Baltic Sea to the Black and Caspian Seas would not be meant as an offensive force, but it should be rather designed to deter and contain Russian expansion in Eastern Europe. By supplying those countries with modern military equipment Washington might strengthen pro-U.S. political forces in each country and create a wall behind which foreign investment could take place.

So far, the *Inter-Marium Alliance* might have been partly operationalized by the Biden Administration. However, its Southern flank (consisting of Bulgaria, Türkiye, Georgia and Azerbaijan) has not been fully aligned with U.S. interests yet. It was largely in the WBS where president J. Biden had largely failed, while in the Baltic Sea he had succeeded tying in

<sup>1</sup> George Friedman – “From Estonia to Azerbaijan: American Strategy After Ukraine”, March 2014,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/stratfor/2014/03/26/from-estonia-to-azerbaijan-american-strategy-after-ukraine/>

Sweden, and Finland, which were not included in G. Friedman's initial outline of the *Inter-Marium Alliance*. Nevertheless, theoretically, president D. Trump could do better where Biden had failed as he might activate his own good chemistry with Turkish president R.T. Erdogan, who, in turn, might be instrumental to bringing Georgia and Azerbaijan on-board, while creating an additional incentive for Bulgaria to join. Of course, such a skilful geopolitical move by D. Trump shouldn't be taken for granted nor should one delude itself that there wouldn't be significant costs for getting there. However, also the benefits might be much broader than in the WBS region thanks to a potential better U.S.-Turkish political-military coordination in parts of the Middle East (most notably in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran).

In several past issues, we have touched upon Turkiye's multi-vector foreign policy ensuing from its strategic geographic position at the intersection of Europe, Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, and Eurasia (i.e. South Caucasus and Central Asia). In fact, Turkiye is a well-established regional power, which could be described as a "*swing state*".

As such, over the last decades, Ankara has developed a number of strategic partnerships with key actors from those regions, sometimes at the expense of its relations with Western partners. For the last 20+ years, Russia has been one of Turkiye's main strategic partners. Their compartmentalized relationship has covered a very large geographical area: from the WBS to Central Asia, and from Syria to Libya. For example, in Ukraine, Turkiye has plaid a very complex role as both a mediator between Kyiv and Moscow, arms supplier for Kyiv, and facilitator for Moscow to shun Western sanctions. Or in the South Caucasus, after the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the geopolitical "*status quo*" has been built upon the Russo-Turkish condominium, currently joined by Iran, and more discretely by China, while the West

has been struggling to get back into the regional geopolitical game.

From Turkiye's perspective, regional stability in the WBS is crucial. As the custodian of the 1936 Montreux Convention regarding the regime of the Black Sea Straits, Turkiye has had a long record of resisting any extended stay by non-riparian, including NATO, warships in the Black Sea. This policy, shaped by concerns for preventing regional crises from escalating and maintaining a fragile balance with Russia, has caused Turkiye's loyalty to be perceived "*at best, as ambiguous and, at worst, suspicious*" by some of its NATO allies, most notably the U.S. (<https://www.brookings.edu>) This would be also a serious liability for NATO, if it was ever to be involved into a direct war against Russia, as it would drastically limit its options for defending WBS member-states Romania and Bulgaria, given that Ankara might veto any potential NATO operations in the Black Sea.

Turkiye's "*Asia Anew*" initiative has signified Ankara's pivot toward Asia. This initiative has emphasized Turkiye's historical, linguistic, and cultural ties with the continent, aiming to enhance economic and trade relations with the countries of Asia, particularly with China. It also sought to strengthen political and security cooperation with multilateral organizations, including the China-Russia-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). (<https://jamestown.org>) In the Caspian Sea and in Central Asia, Turkiye is promoting its own multilateral format —the Organization of Turkic States (OTC)—which is shifting from a platform for dialogue to an organization advancing comprehensive cooperation. The member states—Turkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan— have adopted an ambitious Turkic World Vision 2040. "*Turkic cooperation is also helping to reinvigorate the Trans-Caspian trade and transport corridor, better known as the Middle Corridor, as an alternative route for trade between*

*Europe and Asia, bypassing Russia.”*  
(<https://nationalinterest.org>)

Most recently, Türkiye has also fancied joining the BRICS+, an expanding global group of non-Western countries -originally established by Brazil, Russia, India and China- aspiring to balance the Western G7. Türkiye is also an active player in the Middle East, in particular in neighbouring Syria, and Iraq, and a strong supporter of the Palestinian state. However, Türkiye has its own international agenda, which does not include subordination to either Russia, China, or the U.S.

Given Ankara’s multi-vector policy has required maintaining a certain level of predictability in its compartmentalized relationship with Russia and avoiding its engagement in simultaneous conflicts on multiple fronts, maintaining regional stability in the WBS is a vital Turkish interest. If presidents D. Trump and R.T. Erdogan would come to trading their countries’ security interests, that is maintaining stability in the WBS against joining the *Inter-Marium Alliance*, the Black Sea shifting into a *de facto* NATO/West-Russia buffer zone could become feasible. Naturally, such a geopolitical transaction would be, in principle, conditional to finding an acceptable compromise for ending the military hostilities in Ukraine.

The impact of recent developments in some WBS states on their geopolitical choices and of the external factors have been discussed extensively in past issues (Georgia’s and Moldova’s domestic politics and geopolitical imperatives, US/NATO regional approaches, China-Russia partnership in Eurasian geopolitics), or they might be addressed in future issues (EU engagement with the WBS). Summarizing their potential impact on geopolitical shifts in the Black Sea region we would quote A. Colibasanu, who has recently written for “Geopolitical Futures”: “*With Bulgaria taking a pragmatic approach between Western and Russian*

*interests, Georgia leaning pro-Russian and Moldova in political gridlock, the Black Sea region faces increasing geopolitical instability. This situation undermines the formation of a cohesive pro-Western security coalition [A/N Inter-Marium Alliance?], limiting NATO and EU capacity to establish a robust regional deterrent against Russian actions.”* (“*Black Sea Region: Divided not Quite Conquered*” from <https://geopoliticalfutures.com>) Consequently, a Western robust deterrent against Russia including Türkiye would require restoring a certain level of geopolitical stability in the WBS as a regional imperative for both NATO and the EU.

In conclusion, pending the outcomes of the Russia-Ukraine war and a possible transaction on regional security between presidents D. Trump and R.T. Erdogan, the Black Sea might eventually shift into a buffer between Russia and the West. As such, Türkiye's regional influence ensuing from a closer relationship with the upcoming Trump administration might be growing, while Europeanisation beyond the current borders of the EU would likely remain an afterthought. That might pose serious compatibility challenges to Ukraine’s and Moldova’s potential accession to the EU. As for Russia, whose decimated Black Sea fleet has been currently cornered in the North-Eastern port of Novorossiysk, a Black Sea buffer zone might be acceptable. Moscow wouldn’t have the military power to stand up against NATO’s navies, if Türkiye allowed their unhindered access to the Black Sea. Such a geopolitical shift would contrast starkly with the thoroughly Westernized Baltic Sea rapidly turning itself into NATO’s/EU’s main bulwark against Russia’s potential expansion Westwards. No wonder that Moscow is increasingly betting on Belarus, its only military ally in the region stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.



### About EGF

The European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) was established in early 2010 by several independently minded practitioners of European geopolitics, who saw a certain vacuum in the information flow leading into the European geopolitical discussion. EGF is dedicated, therefore, towards the promotion of an objective, Pan-European geopolitical debate incorporating the views of Wider-European opinion shapers rather than simply those from the mainstream European Union (EU) member states. EGF seeks to elaborate upon European decision makers' and other relevant stakeholders' appreciation of European geopolitics by encouraging and effectively expanding the information flow from east to west, from south to north. In order to achieve these objectives, the European Geopolitical Forum was established as an independent internet-based resource, a web-portal which aims to serve as a knowledge hub on Pan-European geopolitics. EGF's strength is in its unique ability to gather a wide range of affiliated experts, the majority of whom originate from the countries in the EU's external neighbourhood, to examine and debate core issues in the Wider-European geopolitical context. Exchange of positions and interactivity between east and west, south and north, is at the heart of the EGF project. Please visit our website for further information at [www.gpf-europe.com](http://www.gpf-europe.com).

### About the Author

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