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Introduction

By **Andrea Margelletti** – President

The war between Russia and Ukraine has entered its fourth year, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say its twelfth. While it is true that Russia's large-scale invasion began on 24 February 2022, it is equally true that the Kremlin's political interference and low- and medium-intensity military activities against Kyiv began systematically in April 2014. The distinction between dates and the different ways of counting the years of conflict are not just a stylistic exercise or an academic quarrel. On the contrary, from an analytical point of view, recognizing that we are facing a decade-long conflict that entered a phase of greater intensity in 2022 offers a different perspective for the development of future forecasting.

Indeed, the Russian-Ukrainian war could be categorised into two distinct phases: the first, from 2014 to 2022, was one of interdiction, while the second, from 2022 to the present day, has been one of radicalisation. In the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity and the ousting of pro-Russian President Yanukovich, the Kremlin opted for a containment strategy consisting of the immediate annexation of Crimea and unofficial military support for Ukrainian militias in Donbas to prevent Kyiv from sliding into the Euro-Atlantic orbit and transitioning to a domestic and foreign political system that marked a break with Russia's colonial and Soviet past. Moscow had essentially succeeded in its aim, freezing the conflict in the emptiness of the Minsk Agreements and hoping that Europe and the United States would lose interest in the issue and that, as a result, Ukraine would abandon all hope for a future of reform, liberalisation, and independence from the sphere of influence of its powerful neighbour. However, pro-European and Atlanticist aspirations in Kyiv did not subside and, aided by a convergence of international factors such as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the hasty Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, and

Russia's need to externalise an internal crisis that was about to explode, Ukraine's project of emancipation from the Russian yoke was vigorously revived between 2021 and early 2022. This time, Moscow's threats of force and continued disruptive actions in the two separatist puppet republics of Luhansk and Donetsk were not enough. Invasion became necessary to try to shake up the Western-centric global order and regain control of what was considered a rebellious province of the empire.

The war has now entered its fourth year of this second phase, characterised by significantly higher levels of intensity over a longer period, with no acceptable room for negotiation. The risk of a conventional continental escalation in Europe continues to grow month by month. At the same time, neither the Kremlin nor Kyiv appears willing to back down or reach a compromise, despite mounting concerns about economic and military sustainability.

In this context, 2025 was a revolutionary and politically intense year. The undisputed protagonist was President Donald Trump, who openly declared the United States' desire to change the terms of its partnership with both Kyiv and the European countries, affecting the fragile balance of NATO, and demanding that allies increase their military spending and be willing to manage problems in their own backyard directly. The crisis of Western unity and the US desire to seduce Russia to divide it from Beijing have greatly benefited Moscow, which has found itself facing an uninspiring military budget and a loss of influence in the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Africa.

The European response has been ambivalent so far. On the one hand, the Trump hurricane has begun to shake national political and strategic consciences, forcing the ruling classes to invest more in defence to improve deterrence levels towards the Kremlin and autonomy towards Washington. At the same time, however, the White House's tough stance, as exemplified by the tariff war, has unsettled Europe and exposed its usual divisions. Fear of escalation runs deep in the old

continent, and few countries have so far had the courage to face the risk of open war with the Kremlin.

The longer the conflict continues, the more the room for manoeuvre and options available to the belligerents and their respective factions supporting them are reduced. The general impression is that the conflict will reach a turning point in the near future. The first branch could lead to a hypothetical freeze or a reduction in the intensity of hostilities, allowing all parties to catch their breath and resume the conflict in the coming months or years after adequate preparation. The second branch, on the other hand, leads directly to a continental escalation, with the direct involvement of European countries and unpredictable outcomes from all perspectives. In both cases, analysis of the strategic factors suggests that the second phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is nearing its end. This means that the strategies and methods of action adopted so far are becoming obsolete and that new ones will take their place. The only certainty is that peace in Europe is still a long way off.



Figure 1 - State of the Russian occupation of Ukraine as of February 2022 (CeSI Analysis).

I. The conflict political dimension

By **Marco Di Liddo** – Director

2025 was the year in which the war between Russia and Ukraine felt the impact of the second Trump administration, which has so far failed to bring about a systemic change in the balance of the crisis, despite introducing new elements compared to the past. The *tycoon* had based his election campaign on the bombastic declaration that he would be able to build a solid and lasting peace between Kyiv and Moscow within a few months, only to then come up against the harsh reality of the two contenders' rigid positions and surrender to their mutual unwillingness to accept compromises deemed unfavourable. The inclination to refuse concessions to the enemy stemmed from the conviction, on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides, that they could improve their position on the battlefield, thereby transforming military gains into political ones, and that they were fighting an existential conflict. Consequently, the military stalemate and the lack of decisive battles or clear, unequivocal shifts in the balance of hostilities in favour of either side have inevitably led to a political stalemate. The White House's approach to the war between Russia and Ukraine has been ambiguous, driven by sometimes conflicting considerations of expediency and focused on strengthening the President's image as a strong leader and on advancing a new era of assertive and pragmatic US foreign policy. Washington has reiterated that the European continent, and therefore the Ukrainian crisis, no longer represents a priority for the US global strategy, which is clearly oriented towards Asia and the People's Republic of China.

As a result, US involvement has changed in terms of content and methods of action. Firstly, military support has been made conditional on European countries paying for weapons, in a sort of revival of the old *Cash and Carry* policy of the Second World War, and on the signing of a complex agreement with Kyiv, concerning the exploitation of critical raw materials and Ukraine's energy and infrastructure resources. In short, the United States has adopted an almost mercantilist approach to the conflict, in which any form of aid had to be paid for at the right price. Secondly, the White House has repeatedly stressed that European

security is primarily a matter for European countries and that, for this reason, their military spending and contribution to NATO should increase to the painful threshold of 5% of GDP. The behaviour of the US administration has marked the beginning of the deepest crisis between the United States and Europe since the end of the Second World War, manifested not only in differences over the handling of the Ukrainian issue but, above all, in the imposition of tariffs, the threat of gradual disengagement from NATO and the conflict arising from Washington's claims on Greenland.



Figure 2 - Donald Trump welcomes a visibly satisfied Vladimir Putin in Anchorage, Alaska, on 15 August 2025.

The fluctuating relationship between Trump and Putin, both personal and strategic, also affected American actions. In the US President's view, Russia should be a key player in weakening and downsizing China. For this reason, Moscow should be distanced from Beijing by offering favourable conditions in negotiations with Kyiv. In some cases, this vision has taken the form of explicit bias in favour of the Kremlin, as in the meeting between Putin and Trump in Anchorage, Alaska (15 August 2025). On that occasion, the White House tenant welcomed Putin to American soil with full honours, reinvigorating his image as an authoritative and internationally legitimised leader. This treatment contrasted sharply with that reserved for Ukrainian President Zelensky,

who was publicly insulted during his first meeting in the Oval Office and repeatedly blamed for the failure to resolve the conflict peacefully.

Without a doubt, the moment when the US's attempt at *appeasement* towards Russia became most evident was the publication of the Trump administration's first peace plan between November and December 2025. Going into detail, as regards the clauses favourable to the Kremlin, the plan: recognised Russia's de facto sovereignty over Crimea, the entire Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the occupied parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts, freezing the front line; it blocked any mechanism for Ukraine's integration into NATO, to be established through an explicit constitutional mandate; it prohibited the stationing of NATO troops on Ukrainian territory; it imposed non-discriminatory practices on Ukraine towards minorities and towards the Russian language, media, culture and Orthodox Church; it reduced the Ukrainian Armed Forces to a total of 600,000 units; it prevented NATO from expanding to new members (a clear reference to Moldova and Georgia); it introduced a gradual mechanism for easing international sanctions and sanctioned Russia's reinstatement in the G8; it established a ban on Nazi ideologies (with possible reference to grey areas of Ukrainian nationalism) and finally imposed a ban on Ukraine acquiring nuclear weapons.



Figure 3 – Ukrainian President Zelensky and US President Trump during a heated discussion during their first historical meeting at the White House on 18 August 2025.

At the same time, with regard to the clauses favourable to Ukraine, the plan: offered Kyiv vague US security guarantees, currently under

discussion on the model of Article 5 of the Atlantic Alliance Treaty, to be considered invalid in the event of a Ukrainian invasion of Russia or the launch of missiles on Moscow and St Petersburg; it accelerated the process of Ukraine's integration into the European Union and, in the meantime, established measures for privileged access to the European single market.

In addition, Trump's plan paid specific attention to the issue of reconstruction. In particular, of the approximately £350 billion in Russian assets currently frozen in Western countries and allies (such as Japan), approximately £100 billion would have been used for Ukrainian reconstruction through US-led governance instruments, with a special focus on infrastructure, energy, critical raw materials, and high-tech industry. On the other hand, 50% of the profits from the reconstruction would have gone to Washington. Similarly, another £100 billion would have been committed by European countries. As for the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, it would have been placed under the control of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and its electricity production would have been divided equally between Russia and Ukraine. Finally, Russia would not have hindered Ukrainian navigation activities along the Dnipro River, and both Moscow and Kyiv would have guaranteed corridors for the export of wheat and cereals.

It is clear that such a project was entirely in the Kremlin's interests and was unacceptable to Kyiv and European countries, both of which were excluded from the preparatory phase and thus reduced to passive, subordinate roles in negotiations between the two great powers, the United States and Russia.

Ukraine's firm refusal of what was, in effect, an unconditional surrender, and Europe's unwillingness to give in to US assertiveness, led to a profound change in the plan and the reintroduction of conditions that were decidedly fairer to Kyiv and more punitive towards the Russian aggressor. This has been demonstrated by the disappearance of the *de facto* or *de jure* recognition of the Kremlin's conquests, as well as any compromise on the refusal to allow new members to join the Atlantic Alliance. In addition, the Euro-Atlantic bloc has begun to argue for robust security guarantees to be offered to Kyiv, binding and directly inspired by NATO's Article 5. Finally, there were more explicit

discussions of using frozen Russian assets in Europe to finance both post-war reconstruction and the bureaucratic and military costs of running the state apparatus and the Ukrainian resistance.



Figure 4 – The Coalition of the Willing meeting in London (2 March 2025).

However, beyond its intentions, the European Union showed its now customary internal divisions and uncertainties about the best strategy to adopt. Overall, European action has been ambivalent. On the one hand, Brussels has tried to relaunch common defence projects, such as ReArm Europe (Readiness 2030), and has managed to continue its campaign of economic sanctions against the Kremlin, adding measures against liquefied natural gas and the shadow tanker fleet (crucial for the illegal trade in crude oil). Furthermore, it has continued to provide funds, which, as of 31 December 2025, amounted to a total of over €201 billion (compared to €115 billion from the United States). On the other hand, the European Union seemed extremely vulnerable and fragile when the quality of its commitment to supporting Ukraine had to shift from an economic to a purely military context. In fact, the continent was still divided between those who perceive the reality and concreteness of the Russian military threat and those who, on the contrary, believe it is unlikely that Moscow could be capable or willing to attack territories other than Ukraine and Moldova. These two factions share a fear of

escalation and doubts about the political, social, economic, and psychological sustainability of facing a conflict with Moscow. The difference lies in their different approaches to such a risk: while the first group of countries (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden and Finland) have already launched programmes to strengthen the capabilities and industrial capacity of their defence sectors, the second group (Spain, Greece, Hungary, Slovakia) are trying in every way to find a compromise that would freeze the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, even at the cost of reducing Kyiv's territory.

In general, the European population is frightened by the possibility of an escalation of the conflict and does not want to bear the social and material sacrifices associated with the renewal of the military apparatus. Moreover, it does not accept the fact that international relations have entered a new phase of bellicose competition characterised by the more direct and unscrupulous use of force. The most obvious evidence of this division is the consolidation of the activities of a small group of European countries, in particular the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, which are determined to speed up decision-making processes and to offer even more direct forms of support to Kyiv, should conditions become critical.

In any case, the main issue to be resolved remains the security guarantees to be offered to Kyiv. In fact, the new European peace plan, which amends and corrects Trump's initial plan, explicitly refers to the construction of a collective security and defence architecture inspired by the NATO model, without, however, going into detail about the mechanisms for its activation or clarifying the types of support envisaged. In any case, only the United Kingdom and France have explicitly provided for the possibility of sending troops to Ukrainian territory, and, overall, all guarantees provided are subject to the cessation of hostilities and the signing of a peace treaty or an armistice. In short, as long as fighting continues on the Ukrainian battlefields, no binding agreement will be signed.



Figure 5 - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and General Kirilo Bidanov, former head of Ukrainian military intelligence and now Head of the Ukrainian Presidential Office (4 October 2024).

In this context, neither side is willing to back down. Ukraine continues to offer orderly resistance to the invasion, bolstered by the iron will of its people and its clear technological, innovative, and doctrinal superiority over the enemy. However, as the war enters its fourth year, the psychological and material burden on both the civilian population and the armed forces is considerable: difficulties in rotating and replacing troops at the front, dependence on foreign aid, and a turbulent domestic political context characterised by multiple institutional and generational conflicts make the resistance effort increasingly difficult. What worried European supporters was not only the lack of adequate internal political debate, which was understandable in a country at war, but, above all, the resilience of the old evils of corruption and nepotism, as well as the conflict between different interest groups. The latter are well represented by the feud between powers and the obstacles that, at times, Parliament, economic oligarchies, and parts of the Armed Forces and Intelligence and Security Services have placed in the way of the anti-corruption authorities' work.

As for the Russian Federation, 2025 also proved to be a disappointing year in terms of military and, consequently, political results. Territorial gains were limited and came at a very high human and material cost, with attrition rates unsustainable in the long term. In this regard, suffice

it to say that in the quarter between the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026, the number of deaths (approximately 50,000) exceeded the number of recruits (approximately 30,000). In addition, Moscow had to contend with the effectiveness of sabotage and long-range attacks, mainly carried out with drones by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, both concentrated against the military and strategic economic infrastructure of the Russian Federation. Specifically, the Kremlin has almost completely lost its strategic bombing capability, compromising part of its nuclear triad, and has seen the systematic destruction of refineries and oil pipelines, with a devastating impact on exports of crude oil and refined petroleum products, i.e., the backbone of the economic system and, therefore, of the financing of the war effort. Although the Russian population seems accustomed to the conflict, both because of its belief in the objectives proclaimed by propaganda and because of the fierce repression by the security apparatus, the deterioration in living standards and the lack of indisputable successes on the battlefield have eroded the basis of consensus for the vertical power structure.



Figure 6 – Russian President Vladimir Putin and Valery Gerasimov, Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces and one of the main architects of Russia's hybrid warfare doctrine.

In foreign policy, too, Moscow has lamented a significant decline in its influence. The considerable absorption of resources by the war has prevented the proper development of penetration strategies in Africa, where the Wagner model is less effective, albeit still fairly solid, than in the recent past. The military dictatorships in Mali, Niger, and Burkina

Faso continue to turn to the Kremlin for patronage due to a lack of alternatives and a need for weapons, food, and international political support, even though results against jihadist militias are scarce. As for the Middle East, Russia has lost its historic ally Assad in Syria and has had to come to terms with the new Islamist government forces led by Ahamad al-Shaara in order to maintain a now meagre military presence in Latakia and Tartus. At the same time, Putin has proved incapable of guaranteeing minimum levels of protection for the Iranian leadership (Ayatollah and Pasdaran) and risks seeing his last partner in the region swept away by the synergistic action of Washington and Tel Aviv. Finally, the Russians have lost appeal in the Caucasus, where Turkey and the United States have managed to resolve the decades-long conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and are now caught in the grip of dependence on Chinese capital and technology. In a nutshell, the Federation can be considered a modern 'Sick Man of Europe', to paraphrase the expression used to describe the state of the Ottoman Empire on the eve of the First World War. Just as then, conflict is perhaps the Kremlin's last resort in its desperate bid for international revival and to avoid the final stage of decline.

Despite this deficit, the Russian war machine remains operational, and the defence industry continues to produce drones, missiles, and medium- and long-range artillery, which have now become the backbone of the offensive strategy in the absence of an effective ground manoeuvre. Although afflicted by growing economic hardship, the Kremlin does not appear close to collapse and is determined to continue the war at any cost, aware that defeat would trigger a crisis with unpredictable outcomes and convinced that it can overwhelm Kyiv and its Western allies thanks to its supposed greater resistance to attrition. The willingness to continue the conflict and to be open to *escalation* is clearly evident from a number of factors. The first is the absolute rigidity of the negotiations: Moscow has made no significant concessions and continues to demand, among other things, recognition of the conquered territories, limitations on Ukrainian military capabilities, the absence of foreign military contingents on Ukrainian territory, and a halt to Kyiv's integration into NATO. The second factor is the frequent use of nuclear threats, i.e., the willingness to use atomic weapons, both

strategic and tactical, should the conflict become critical. Finally, the third factor is the ongoing and pervasive hybrid warfare campaign against Europe, consisting of a relentless information campaign on social networks and, above all, continuous cyber-attacks and sabotage against critical infrastructure in the energy sector and railway communication lines. In 2025, the Kremlin's aggression in hybrid warfare activities grew exponentially and was dramatically represented by multiple incidents involving drones and aircraft. These included the violation of Estonian airspace for 12 minutes by three MIG-31s (19 September 2025), the crash of more than 23 drones on Polish territory (9 September 2025), and the overflight of unidentified drones over several civilian airports in Denmark, Norway, Germany, and over some military bases in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Denmark. In addition, dozens of drones repeatedly violated the airspace of Romania and Moldova. Added to this are unidentified attacks against some defence industry production sites in Germany and the United Kingdom.

In summary, sabotage, airspace violations, and drone incidents have multiple objectives. First, to facilitate the collection of information and data on the defence systems and reaction times of NATO countries' military and security apparatuses. Second, to spread panic among the civilian population and exacerbate divisions between citizens and institutions, fuelling fear and social conflict. Finally, to test the resilience of the Atlantic Alliance and verify its unity of purpose, political mechanisms, and cohesion. In fact, aware of their economic, technological, and conventional military inferiority to the Euro-Atlantic bloc, the Russians have no choice but to bet on the weaknesses of Western countries, trying to manipulate public opinion, speculate on feelings of insecurity and unwillingness to make sacrifices, and identify the most vulnerable points in the adversary's system. On a continent whose population continues to fear the effects of a missile strike or the use of a nuclear weapon, the best card in the Russians' hands continues to be a large-scale hybrid attack capable of blocking the banking and healthcare systems, disrupting communications, and spreading false and biased news online. Such a scenario aims to produce a total

blackout in the target country, causing political and social paralysis that would nullify the advantages of economic and military superiority.

II. The conflict military dimension

By **Emmanuele Panero** – Head of the Defense and Security Desk

The culmination of the fourth year of hostilities in the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine crystallises a war scenario characterised by a substantial strategic-operational stalemate contrasted with almost incessant tactical activism on the part of Moscow's military apparatus. The context is one of 1,461 days of high-intensity, large-scale conventional warfare, fought along an increasingly undefined front stretching approximately 1,250 kilometres, dominated by frictional dynamics driven by opposing capabilities to generate, sustain, and regenerate combat power. The operational, tactical, and strategic theatre of operations is a multi-domain battlefield with marked air-land dominance, persistently marked by transparency and lethality, which prevents the conduct of large-scale actions by forcing the dispersion of forces, and in which the predominance of the Tactical Reconnaissance-Strike *Complex* (TRSC) tends to interdict manoeuvres.

All these factors have significantly impacted the effects of the coordinated tactical offensives, planned and conducted seamlessly by Russian troops since at least May 2025, which have led the Kremlin's forces to conquer up to 5,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory. Russian military operations have been divided into a main front, represented by the so-called Donetsk axis, where Moscow concentrated and continues to focus its forces and firepower, a secondary effort consisting of the slightly more northerly Luhansk axis, and a number of other sectors along the entire line of contact, where Russian formations have carried out systematic assaults and sporadic attempts at penetration with varying degrees of intensity. These actions have been mainly aimed at fixing and distracting Kyiv's units, also engaging its operational reserves, in different and distant areas of the theatre, enabling the Russian military to maintain the initiative at the tactical-operational level, exploiting its mere numerical superiority and catalysing its *combat power* in targeted actions in limited areas of the Donbas. Despite these premises, the predictability of the Kremlin's line of action, the fragmentation of its offensive effort, the preparedness of the Ukrainian defences, and the marked shortcomings in terms of the

mobility of Moscow's troops have contributed to limiting Russian advances. With this in mind, Kyiv's forces have fought a careful rearguard action, delaying the enemy's progress, inflicting constant human and material losses on the adversary, almost always halting attempts at penetration, even mechanised ones, carried out above the level of minor units, and carrying out selective local counterattacks both to interfere with the rhythm of Russian operations and to counter their infiltration activities.



Figure 7 - Russian units infiltrating the town of Pokrovsk (eastern Ukraine).

Precisely, the widespread use of infiltration tactics was one of the distinctive features of the last year of hostilities. This was an extreme form of a distributed and dispersed approach to manoeuvring, which involved the repeated use of covert insertion of units across the line of contact to take up positions in the immediate rear of the enemy, in order to circumvent their defensive deployment, create a contested grey area straddling the front, neutralise enemy positions, direct indirect artillery and third-dimensional fire, and support subsequent frontal assaults. On the one hand, these activities included the concealed advance of foot soldiers, who exploited the terrain, vegetation, and even thermal camouflage blankets to evade detection, including by aerial or ground drones. On the other hand, the rapid insertion of two- and four-wheel off-road vehicles to evade targeting by first-person-view unmanned aerial vehicles (FPV UAV). Infiltration activities were then systematised by the Russian military into a new

tactical-operational model that was replicated with relative success, particularly in the Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts, where they were combined with widespread battlefield air interdiction (BAI – *Battlefield Air Interdiction*) through continuous targeting, mainly with FPV UAVs, long-range attack drones (OWA UAVs – *One-Way Attack Unmanned Aerial Vehicles*) and gliding aerial munitions, of enemy logistics lines in the rear. The disruption and degradation of enemy defences thus generated then enables the Russian front to advance through enveloping assaults conducted down to the minor tactical complex level.



Figure 8 – Still image from a surveillance camera of the attack carried out by a Ukrainian underwater drone against an Improved Kilo-class submarine at the pier in the port of Novorossiysk, along the eastern coast of the Black Sea.

Despite the initial progress achieved by Moscow's troops through the adoption of this approach, Ukrainian units appear to have already developed specific countermeasures, focusing on rapid counterattacks against areas subject to enemy infiltration and medium-range bombardment of command posts and pre-assembly areas of Russian formations deep in the rear. The real effectiveness of the Kremlin's new tactical-operational model has been partly undermined by a frequent tendency to resort to unsupported infiltrations, with the sole purpose of fuelling an information campaign aimed at pursuing effects in the adversary's cognitive dimension, exaggerating the results achieved by Russian offensives, and presenting Ukrainian defences as close to collapse. The overlap between the strategic objectives of this campaign and the tactical objectives of operations on the ground, and the priority given to the former, affected decisions at the theatre level, often leading to ephemeral advances and the temporary occupation of vulnerable

positions. The need to support strategic communication, illustrating progress on all fronts with visual evidence, ultimately contributed to further fragmenting the offensive effort of Moscow's forces.



Figure 9 – The attack with an Oreshnik intermediate-range ballistic missile against the Lviv Oblast (western Ukraine).

However, the Russian-Ukrainian battlefield remained far from confined to the dynamics within 30 kilometres on either side of the line of contact. On the contrary, hostilities continued to expand into the strategic depths of the respective deployments, both with massive long-range targeting campaigns against opposing industrial production bases and with hybrid and sabotage actions. Confirming a trend towards a progressive increase in the number of attack vectors used to strike each other's critical infrastructure, the fourth year of the conflict saw the normalisation of often saturating salvos, with a weekly total of around 1,050 OWA UAVs and 30 missiles launched by the Russian Federation and 500 OWA UAVs deployed by Ukraine. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in the spectrum of activities and incidents, including disinformation and misinformation, suspicious drone flights over strategic installations, cyber and electromagnetic interference, as well as military provocations, including the open violation of Euro-Atlantic airspace, involving in at least one case the interception of potential threats, attributable to the Kremlin and conducted against European countries of the Atlantic Alliance. On the other hand, Kyiv has extended the scope of its operations both by plausibly neutralising top

figures in the Russian security-military apparatus in a series of explosive attacks and by carrying out attacks with naval drones (USVs – *Unmanned Surface Vessels*) against oil infrastructure in the Caspian Sea and ships linked to Moscow's shadow fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean. This expansion included an unprecedented, high-impact clandestine infiltration and multiple saturation attacks using FPV UAVs, namely Operation Spider's Web, against a series of Russian bases hosting strategic bombers in June 2025.



Figure 10 – The view from a first-person view (FPV UAV) drone in the final phase of an attack during Operation Spider's Web (June 2025).

Both in long-range actions and in frontline combat, the use and testing of *unmanned* systems continued to profoundly characterise the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Not only did the mass of aerial drones (UAVs – Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), land (UGVs), naval (USVs), and, in some cases, underwater (UUVs) drones acquired and deployed in hostilities continue to increase, but the war also saw a succession of firsts and innovations.

From the shooting down of fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft using interceptor missiles launched from USVs, through the integration, albeit of dubious effectiveness, of air-to-air carriers on OWA UAVs, to an unprecedented attack carried out with an explosive UUV against a submarine in port, the Russian-Ukrainian battlefield continues to accentuate its trends towards *dronisation*. This evolutionary trend is

inevitably set to intensify further, informing the return of experience on both sides, both institutionally, as evidenced by the establishment of dedicated *Unmanned Systems Forces* in the military apparatus of both countries, and from an industrial perspective, with massive investments in production that, for Moscow, aim for a volume of almost 1,000 OWA UAVs per day in 2026, while in the case of Ukraine, they aim for a total of 7 million drones in the same year. This is a consolidated trajectory that, by profoundly reshaping the dynamics of combat, increasing its transparency and lethality, revolutionises the requirements for force protection and opens up new paradigms in collaborative combat (MUM-T – *Manned-Unmanned Teaming*), laying the foundations for the future of *unmanned warfare*.

Drones and their countermeasures capabilities are at the heart of both the strengthening of defences along the eastern flank of the Atlantic Alliance, particularly in the *Baltic Sentry* and *Eastern Sentry* operations, and a hypothetical monitoring of a possible ceasefire in Ukraine. The latter would be part of broader discussions on the security guarantees provided by Euro-Atlantic countries and the articulation of a presumed reassurance force near or within Ukrainian territory, in the context of a potential agreement between Kyiv and Moscow. This is a prospect that, beyond the persistent strategic differences between the two sides, presents significant challenges to the credibility and sustainability of deterrence, as well as to the effectiveness and resilience of the defence supporting Ukraine. The significant size of the theatre and the conventional, high-intensity and large-scale nature of a potential resumption of hostilities require extremely significant mass and firepower, as well as the readiness to engage and sustain a direct confrontation with a *peer competitor* over time. An adversary that could regenerate its *combat power* to pre-conflict levels or, in any case, to levels capable of posing a direct threat to limited sectors of the Euro-Atlantic eastern flank within a period of three to five years, through the perpetuation of the current industrial mobilisation of a war economy.

Outside a framework agreement that would end the conflict, the operational and tactical dynamics of the Russian-Ukrainian war appear set to continue unchanged even beyond the fourth year of fighting. The pre-eminent strategic factor that could determine the outcome or the

relative timing continues to be, on the one hand, the long-term economic sustainability of the Russian war effort, which is increasingly close to expiry, and, on the other, the resolve and consistency of military and financial assistance to Ukraine from Euro-Atlantic countries.

III. Russia and Ukraine: two war economies

By **Alexandru Fordea** – Head of the Geoeconomics Desk

Four years since the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and after twenty rounds of sanctions approved by the European Union, the war continues despite obstacles and economic pressure. In fact, although extensive and progressively diversified, the sanctions have not yet produced the desired effect: the collapse of the Russian economy. The initial impact was indeed violent, with capital flight from Russia, a collapse in imports, and the paralysis of entire industrial sectors. However, as early as the second half of the first year of the war (2022), Moscow began to show an ability to adapt, which, however, seems to be increasingly fragile.

In this regard, forecasts for 2025 show a significant slowdown in Russian growth, ranging from 1.4% estimated by the International Monetary Fund and 2.5% predicted by the Kremlin's national authorities. At the same time, the unemployment rate has fallen to historically low levels, standing at around 2.4% since the summer of 2024, a sign of a labour market under severe pressure. This stalemate is not accidental. In recent years, the Kremlin has accelerated the conversion of the productive apparatus towards a partial war economy, drastically increasing military spending to 7% of GDP and over 30% of total public spending, and supporting incomes in the regions most affected by the war effort. Real wages have grown significantly, driven by a chronic labour shortage, while social transfers to military families and defence industry workers have helped to contain the risk of widespread protests.

Externally, Russia has partially offset the loss of European markets through a rapid reorganisation of trade flows. China has become Moscow's leading economic partner, with trade exceeding €220 billion in 2024. Russian exports to Beijing focus almost exclusively on raw materials (oil, gas, coal, timber), while manufactured goods, components, and *dual-use* technologies arrive in the opposite direction, often through indirect channels that allow some Western restrictions to

be circumvented. This combination of factors has fuelled the narrative of 'Russian resilience'.

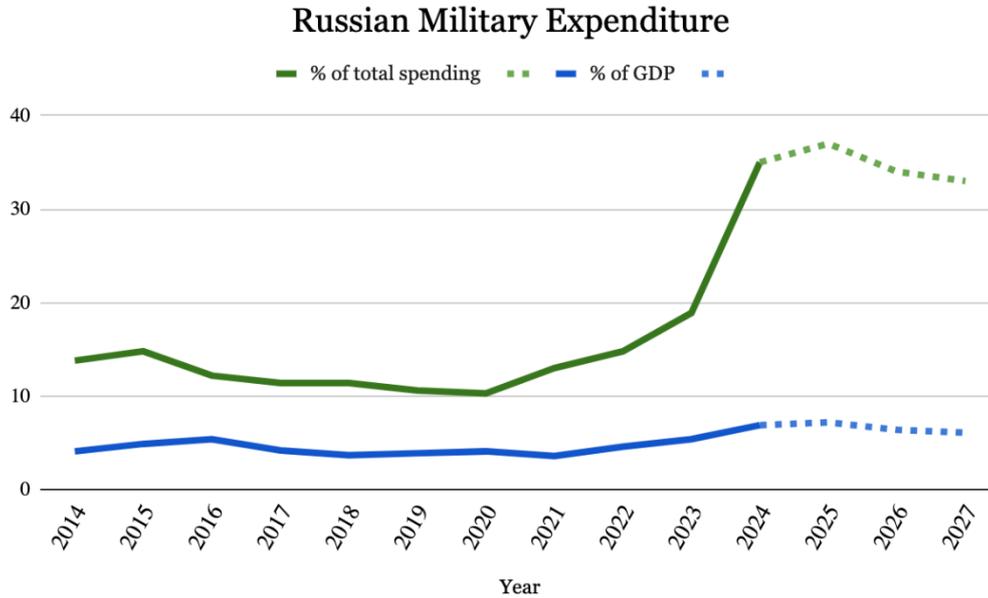


Figure 11 – Russia’s military spending 2014-2027 (CeSI analysis of SIPRI data)

However, behind the growth figures lies an unbalanced economic structure. The current expansion is not the result of increased productivity or widespread private investment, but rather of massive public spending concentrated in the military sector, accompanied by intensive use of fiscal reserves and tight control of the financial system.

The signs of overheating are relatively obvious. Already in 2024, average annual inflation reached nearly 10%, eroding households' purchasing power. This trend, although partially mitigated, continued in 2025, with average inflation well above 8%. To counteract price dynamics, the Bank of Russia raised its benchmark rate to a historic high of 21%, kept it unchanged at the beginning of 2025, and then lowered it to 16% in the second half of the year. Such a restrictive monetary policy has put pressure on the private sector, reducing access to credit for businesses and consumers and accentuating the economy's dependence on state orders. Specifically, credit to the private sector has contracted, non-defence investment has slowed, and many small and medium-sized enterprises are struggling to bear the cost of capital. In practice, while the state pumps resources into the military industry, the rest of the

economy is gradually being stifled by prohibitive financial conditions. This imbalance has reshaped the country's productive fabric, favouring large conglomerates linked to the military-industrial complex and marginalising independent entrepreneurship.



Figure 12 – Inflation rate, average consumer prices (annual percentage change) 2020-2027 (CeSI analysis based on IMF data)

In other words, Russia is growing, but increasingly on an artificial basis. Full employment is largely the result of industrial and military mobilisation, targeted transfers temporarily guarantee social stability, and the trade balance remains positive thanks to energy exports. This is a fragile balance, sustained by extraordinary levers that are unlikely to be maintained indefinitely without generating deeper imbalances.

In this sense, the real financial pillar of the Russian war economy remains the energy sector. Despite the European embargo and the Western *price cap*, Moscow has managed to maintain relatively high export volumes thanks to a parallel transport and intermediation system known as *the shadow fleet*: hundreds of obsolete oil tankers, often registered under flags of convenience, insured by non-Western companies and used to deliver crude oil mainly to Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. This mechanism has allowed the Kremlin to partially circumvent restrictions, preserving revenue streams that are essential to the state budget. However, over the last two years, increasingly

obvious limitations have emerged. Targeted US sanctions against logistics operators and large companies such as Rosneft, Lukoil, and Gazprom have drastically reduced the efficiency of the shadow fleet, with an estimated decline of more than 70% in the operational capacity of ships affected by OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) measures. At the same time, a record volume of unsold oil has accumulated, with over 100 million barrels parked in *floating storage*.

Even the main buyers have shown signs of fatigue. India, which in the first two years of the war had absorbed increasing quantities of discounted *Urals*, has gradually reduced its purchases, while China has established itself as *the real market maker* for Russian crude oil. Beijing buys, but on its own terms: high discounts, payments in renminbi, and contracts that strengthen China's negotiating position in the long term. The result is a structural transformation of the balance of power. While Russia benefits from access to the Chinese market in the short term, in the medium term it risks becoming an almost subordinate supplier of raw materials, closely tied to Asian demand and with increasingly compressed margins. It is no coincidence that a growing share of bilateral trade is settled in Chinese currency, while the rouble is losing its centrality even in regional trade. This dynamic is reflected across the entire Russian economic system. Dependence on energy exports remains high, but real revenues are eroded by discounts on oil, rising logistics costs, and the need to support alternative infrastructure. At the same time, non-energy industries struggle to find competitive outlets, penalised by technological isolation and a lack of private investment.

GDP growth, therefore, masks a deeper fragility: a more militarised economy, financed by progressively shrinking energy revenues and supported by a dominant partner that largely influences trade. It is a model that may work in the short term, but it exposes Moscow to systemic risks in the event of further oil price shocks or a slowdown in Chinese demand. It is precisely in this context that internal overheating takes on broader significance: Russia is not on the brink of collapse but continues to accumulate macroeconomic tensions that make it costly to sustain the conflict under current conditions. A pause in negotiations, even a temporary one, could give the Kremlin the space it needs to cool the economy, replenish reserves, and stabilise energy flows. Added to

these factors is a gradual drain on human capital. The emigration of skilled personnel, which began in 2022, has never completely stopped, while the military is absorbing a growing proportion of young people. The result is an economy that is growing in volume but losing quality: less innovation, fewer advanced skills, less capacity for diversification. Precisely for this reason, the idea of a truce takes on an economic as well as a military dimension. It would ease pressure on the labour market, stabilise the rouble and, potentially, reopen financial channels that are currently closed. This would not necessarily be a definitive peace, but an opportunity to cool an economy operating beyond its structural limits. Indeed, the prolongation of the conflict implies an acceleration of internal distortions and further dependence on Beijing, a price that Moscow may not be willing to pay indefinitely.

While the war has led to an overheated economy for Russia, for Ukraine it has meant an even more radical transformation: the survival of the state has become inseparable from external support. Kyiv spends virtually all its tax revenue on defence, while the country's ordinary functioning (public salaries, pensions, health, education, etc.) is financed almost entirely by Western loans and transfers. The result is an explosion of public debt. At the end of 2025, total exposure exceeded \$213 billion, a figure now close to the value of the entire gross domestic product. In purely accounting terms, the debt-to-GDP ratio is close to 100%, a threshold that, under normal conditions, signals serious vulnerability.

Ukraine General Government Gross Debt (% of GDP)

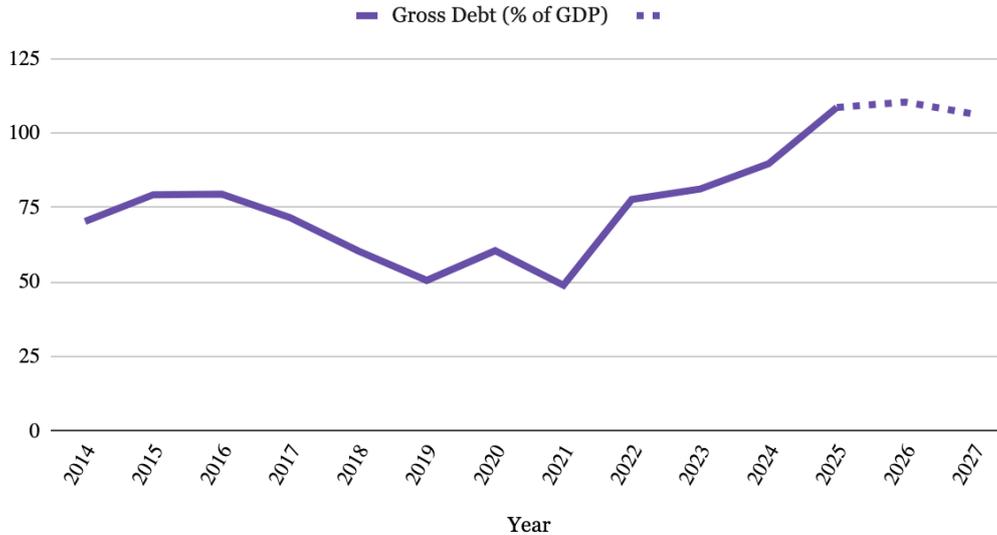


Figure 13 – Ukraine's gross public debt (% of GDP) 2014-2027 (CeSI analysis of IMF data)

However, the raw data hides a more nuanced reality. Much of this debt is held by official creditors, such as the European Union, G7 countries, and multilateral institutions, on highly favourable terms: long maturities, near-zero interest rates, and in some cases repayment mechanisms linked to the proceeds of frozen Russian assets. A significant portion of the new credit lines is structured more like disguised subsidies than like actual commercial loans. This arrangement allows Ukraine to avoid a solvency crisis for now. Nevertheless, the dependence is total. American support, which was crucial in the early years of the conflict, has declined under the Trump administration, leaving Europe with a growing burden. Without a constant flow of external funding, Ukraine's budget would collapse within a few months. The problem is not only quantitative, but structural. In the absence of credible prospects for peace, the deficit remains around 20% of GDP, a level incompatible with any sustainable development trajectory. Even in a post-war scenario, security needs would remain enormous: Kyiv considers it essential to maintain an army of at least 800,000 troops, a force three or four times larger than before 2022, with permanent costs that are difficult to cover with national resources alone.

On the financial markets front, sentiment is extremely sensitive to political developments. Ukrainian securities react in real time to rumours of possible negotiations, a sign that investors see peace as the

key to a return to normality. Meanwhile, the authorities in Kyiv have secured two private debt restructurings and aim to return to international markets only towards the end of the decade, provided that the conflict ends stably. And stability is precisely the crux of the matter: without credible security guarantees, there will be no real inflow of private capital. Reconstruction, however much it is supported by European and multilateral public funds, cannot be transformed into a lasting cycle of growth if the risk of a new Russian offensive persists.

Paradoxically, Ukraine retains significant economic potential. The country has vast agricultural resources, a surprisingly resilient IT sector, and a subsoil rich in critical raw materials, which are increasingly strategic in the European energy transition. However, this future is likely to remain frozen by the war. Every month of fighting adds to the debt, destroys physical and human capital, and delays the moment when the economy can stand on its own two feet again.

The year 2026 could therefore represent a turning point, not because one of the contenders is defeated, but because both begin to perceive the war's marginal cost as exceeding its immediate strategic benefits.

IV. War as seen from the Middle East: continuity, realignments, and new strategic interdependencies

By **Alessio Stilo** – Head of the Middle East and North Africa Desk

The evolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2025 continued to have indirect but significant effects on the balance of power in the Middle East, confirming that the European and Middle Eastern theatres can now be classified within a single interconnected strategic space, albeit with variable geometries. Far from representing a separate issue, therefore, the Ukrainian front has affected the regional positions of Middle Eastern actors, the dynamics of competition between external powers, and the political, military, and economic realignment processes already underway in the region. In this context, the Middle East is not only an area of projection of Russian and Western interests, but also a multiplier of effects that directly and indirectly influences the negotiating and strategic options related to the conflict in Ukraine.

In 2025, events on the Ukrainian front reinforced the perception among all Middle Eastern actors of an international system in transition. Many of these countries continued to interpret the dynamics on the Eastern European flank as a test of the resilience of the Western order and the United States' ability to maintain a hegemonic role in multiple theatres simultaneously. This interpretation has contributed to consolidating a pragmatic and opportunistic approach among Middle Eastern actors, aimed at maximising the benefits of competition between major powers rather than taking a clear side.

In 2025, Russia's posture in the Middle East was affected by the military priorities imposed by the conflict in Ukraine, but this did not translate into a strategic disengagement from the region. On the contrary, Moscow pursued a selective recalibration of its presence, favouring low-cost political, economic, and security instruments over a large-scale direct military footprint. This approach found fertile ground in an area permeated by a tendency to distrust the West and a growing demand for external partners willing to engage without explicit political conditions.



Figure 14 – Portraits of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, Syria.

In the Levant, the repercussions of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict were felt in Syria, where the post-Assad phase continues to reveal the now tangible season of competition between regional actors, primarily Turkey and Israel. In 2025, the relative downsizing of the Russian military presence in Syria was accompanied by the redefinition of bilateral relations, centred on pragmatism, which allowed Moscow to offer military cooperation and selected economic interventions. For Damascus, on the other hand, maintaining the concessions on the Tartus and Hmeimim bases and recalibrating relations seems to serve the purpose of using the Russians as a counterweight to Israel's posture in southern Syria, a stance also shared by the Turkish leadership.

In the Gulf, 2025 confirmed the Arab monarchies' central role as key players at the intersection of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and Middle Eastern dynamics. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar continued to pursue a strategy of functional equidistance, maintaining open channels with Moscow, Kyiv, and Western capitals. This stance has allowed them to strengthen their diplomatic profile and position themselves as platforms for mediation on sensitive issues, from prisoner exchanges to energy and food issues. Overall, however, the

Arab monarchies of the Gulf continue to prioritise cooperation with Moscow on energy matters.

In particular, the United Arab Emirates has consolidated its role as a financial and commercial hub, benefiting from the triangulations resulting from the sanctions regime against Russia. In 2025, Abu Dhabi remained a crucial hub for capital flows, goods, and services linked to Russian interests, while maintaining an official narrative of neutrality. In June 2025, the Emirates also signed a free trade agreement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, reinforced by a supplementary agreement between Moscow and Abu Dhabi in August of the same year.



Figure 15 – The Gulf monarchies continued to play a key role, but prioritised cooperation with Moscow on energy issues.

For its part, Saudi Arabia further capitalised on its energy and political weight, placing the Ukrainian crisis within a broader framework of strategic repositioning. In 2025, Riyadh continued to coordinate with Moscow on oil market management mechanisms, confirming the durability of energy cooperation even amid geopolitical tensions that, moreover, did not have a substantial impact on Russian-Saudi relations. This coordination seems to have reinforced the perception, widespread in the region, of a gradual weakening of the US's ability to impose red lines on its Middle Eastern partners, who appear to be increasingly following a multi-alignment logic depending on the issue at hand.



Figure 16 – Saudi Arabia, the United Emirates, and Qatar have continued to pursue a strategy of functional equidistance, maintaining open channels with Moscow, Kyiv, and Western capitals.

In terms of regional security, the intertwining of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and Middle Eastern dynamics has been particularly evident in the Red Sea and the eastern Mediterranean. Tensions related to the security of maritime routes, already exacerbated by the Gaza crisis and the activities of non-state actors (especially the Yemeni Houthis), took on a systemic dimension, indirectly involving Russian and Ukrainian interests as well. The year 2025 did not change the already well-known dynamics linked to the Russian 'shadow fleet', including in the Middle East, which is one of Moscow's main vehicles for circumventing sanctions.

In North Africa, Libya continued to be one of the main theatres of indirect projection of Russian-Western competition in 2025, with significant repercussions for the Ukrainian dossier. In particular, Moscow has intensified its contacts with actors in eastern Libya in an attempt to consolidate a strategic presence alternative to Syria, or in any case to complement the Syrian one, and to secure logistical access to the central Mediterranean. This activism has been closely monitored by both Kyiv and Western capitals, aware that a Russian strengthening in Libya could translate into greater pressure on multiple fronts.



Figure 17 – Meeting between President Vladimir Putin (right) and President of the Libyan Presidential Council Mohamed Yunus al-Menfi (left) (2023).

Turkey has continued to occupy a peculiar position within this mosaic. Strengthened by its ability to engage all parties, Ankara has maintained a selective mediating role, using the Ukrainian dossier as leverage to enhance its regional influence. The Turkish leadership has sought to present itself as an indispensable interlocutor for both Moscow and Kyiv, capitalising on its presence and influence in Syria, the Black Sea, and the eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, this strategy exposes Turkey to cross-pressures and a delicate balance between regional ambitions and Euro-Atlantic constraints, which Ankara continues to manage by increasingly adopting a multi-alignment posture.

Overall, 2025 confirmed that the Middle Eastern implications of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict cannot be traced back to linear or unidirectional dynamics. On the contrary, they are part of a regional context characterised by fragmentation, multi-level competition, and growing autonomy (and multi-alignment) of local actors. Rather than causing a clear realignment, the Russian-Ukrainian war has accelerated trends already underway, bringing to the fore the transactional, pragmatic approach that dominates international relations in the Middle East.

Looking ahead, it is likely that the evolution of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will continue to interact with Middle Eastern dynamics, especially in relation to energy balances, food security and competition for political influence in Africa and the Levant. In this scenario, the Middle East will remain not only a mirror of the transformations of the international order, but also one of the main laboratories in which these transformations will be tested and, in part, determined.

V. Asian perspectives: the Russian-Ukrainian conflict seen by Beijing and New Delhi

By **Elisa Querini** – Head of the Asia and Pacific Desk

Over the past year, despite their seemingly peripheral position within the European theatre, China and India have been deeply involved in the dynamics of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, particularly regarding their trade relations with the United States and Russia and the need to adapt to the new US administration.

As far as India is concerned, 2025 presented several challenges directly related to its neutral position over the conflict. In August, New Delhi faced further tariffs on its exports to Washington, bringing the total to 50%. According to official White House statements, the reason for these sanctions was India's continued purchase of large quantities of Russian oil, totalling 24.03 billion dollars in the first half of 2025 alone.



Figure 18 – The United States President Donald Trump and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a meeting in February 2025.

In this regard, the parties reached a new agreement in early 2026, providing for the immediate removal of the additional 25% tariffs and an overall reduction in sanctions to 18%. According to the joint statement released by the White House, New Delhi would commit to eliminating or reducing duties on US industrial products and certain food and agricultural goods, striving to address persistent non-tariff

barriers that hinder American agri-food exports and, on both sides, to ensure preferential access to their respective markets. In addition, one key point is India's prospect of future purchases of various products, from energy to military components, worth a total of \$500 billion over the next five years. However, the agreement's signing is now in doubt following President Trump's latest statements on imposing new global tariffs.

With regard to the energy sector, although no explicit reference appears in official documents and statements by Narendra Modi's government



Figure 19 – The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President Vladimir Putin, and President Xi Jinping during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Leaders' Summit held in Tianjin from 31 August to 1 September 2025.

representatives appear rather neutral on the subject, a gradual reduction in the country's dependence on Russian oil imports during 2026 cannot be ruled out, favouring alternative sources of supply, including the United States. This trend is already evident in purchases made by some Indian companies, such as Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum, and Reliance Industries, which reportedly rejected Russian offers for shipments in March and April. Furthermore, the decision could also be influenced by the lack of progress toward an agreement between Washington and Moscow or, at the very least, by a freeze in the conflict in Ukraine, which had been eagerly awaited with the inauguration of the new Trump presidency.

However, recent developments with Washington do not suggest a radical shift away from Moscow, but rather a downsizing of relations. The extent of this transformation will clearly be influenced by the continuation of peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine and the prospect of an end to Russia's isolation by the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Nevertheless, relations remain stable at present, with strong signals from the Modi government. In fact, the Indian Administration is shying away from taking sides, as demonstrated by its visit to China to attend the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation leaders, which was also in response to US tariffs, and by the annual meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, held in India in December 2025. On the latter occasion, the two leaders announced their intention to reach \$100 billion in trade volume by 2030, involving in particular the engineering, pharmaceutical, chemical, and agricultural sectors, and to expand Indian imports to the Russian Federation. It should also be noted that cooperation between India and Russia in the defence and security sector, traditionally one of the pillars of bilateral relations, could undergo a partial readjustment. Although India has gradually reduced its dependence on Russian arms in recent years, Moscow remains a major supplier, accounting for 36% of imports, ahead of France and Israel. However, a further, albeit partial, reduction in this share cannot be ruled out. This trend would respond, on the one hand, to the need to diversify suppliers and thus strengthen strategic value chains. On the other hand, it would be consistent with the *Make in India* initiative, which would favour the creation of joint ventures and the expansion of domestic defence production. Added to this, there is growing awareness of the risks associated with acquiring Russian systems, given the possible presence of Chinese components in sensitive platforms. A sign in this direction could be the omission of any defence agreement from the outcomes of the bilateral summit in December 2025. Furthermore, it cannot be excluded that a further factor of pressure is the risk of future sanctions by Washington, such as the *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act*, a measure aimed at targeting countries that purchase Russian military equipment.

Relations between Russia and China remain stable and structurally positive. Beijing still is a key player for Moscow, both in averting significant international isolation and in maintaining a crucial source of economic and political support. Overall, the People's Republic of China remains officially in favour of promoting a peaceful resolution to the conflict and opposes the shipment of weapons to the parties involved, promising to monitor the sale of *dual-use* products to Moscow during 2025. However, Beijing's contribution in providing material is almost certain. In fact, Russia's international isolation has dramatically increased Moscow's dependence on Chinese technology and equipment, including drone components and microelectronics to support the production of missiles, tanks, and UAVs. In addition, Moscow is increasingly dependent on its energy exports to Beijing, accentuating a strategic asymmetry in favour of the People's Republic of China. Furthermore, Beijing has currently replaced India as Russia's largest customer for sea shipments. This is primarily due to Russia's greater stability compared to other energy sources, such as Iran, which is threatened with possible US intervention after the protests in late December and early January, and to Russia's superior oil quality compared to supplies from Tehran. This picture could broaden in the coming months as Chinese imports of Russian oil increase.

This last point appears especially relevant, as the People's Republic has been at the centre of European and US sanctions for months, particularly due to its economic and commercial support for the Russian Federation. In this context, the relatively positive effects that prolonged conflict has on China should not be underestimated. Among these, it should be noted that hostilities in Europe distract Washington from the Indo-Pacific and, consequently, from China itself. Secondly, Russia's weakening, especially economically, makes Beijing an indispensable partner for Moscow, creating an imbalance in Sino-Russian relations in favour of the People's Republic and opening new opportunities for Chinese action in Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

The conflict has also provided an opportunity, particularly for the People's Republic of China, to promote a narrative focused on the alleged structural weakness of the Euro-Atlantic bloc, reinforced by the US's recent stance of breaking with its allies. In this context, Beijing has been able to present itself as a more stable alternative economic and political interlocutor and as a possible reference point in forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the BRICS, which in recent years have seen a steady expansion of their membership and international visibility.



Figure 20 – Chinese President Xi Jinping attends the Victory Parade on 9 May 2025 with President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

In terms of relations with the European continent, although the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has been a source of tension for India with some international partners, particularly with some states in the Euro-Atlantic bloc, this has not prevented New Delhi from developing stronger ties with them, as demonstrated by the conclusion of negotiations on the Free Trade Agreement with the European Union in January 2026. In addition, the rapprochement between New Delhi and Brussels could be decisive in calming US pressure or at least reducing it. In this context, despite some vulnerabilities, the flexibility of Indian foreign policy and its multi-aligned posture, as expressed in its neutrality towards the

conflict, may continue to be tolerated by Brussels as long as it does not translate into explicit support for Moscow. Regarding Beijing, however, transatlantic tensions do not seem to have led to European disengagement from the Indo-Pacific. On the contrary, the European Union appears intent on expanding and consolidating its presence in the region, a scenario that may not be welcomed by China.

In conclusion, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has not transformed China and India into international mediators, nor has it radically changed their respective global postures. Rather, it has confirmed a moderate foreign policy aimed at exploiting the fractures in the international system, seeking to maximise strategic and economic benefits while attempting to avoid the direct costs of confrontation between powers.

Conclusions: possible future scenarios

By **Marco Di Liddo** – Director

Understanding the future of the war between Russia and Ukraine is a very complicated exercise of predictive analysis, due to the considerable number of political, economic, and security factors that, when combined, can give rise to different trends and scenarios. Nevertheless, even in such a dense and uncertain empirical context, it is possible to isolate the most decisive factors and thus reduce the range of possible alternatives.

The year 2025 has taught us that the effects on the Russian economy of the steroids provided by military investments are beginning to wear off. At this point, the Kremlin will see its options dwindling and will have to make painful choices. The first is to accept economic suffering and to try to compromise with Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic bloc to secure some much-needed breathing space. The second option is to transition to a mature war economy model, which has not been seen in Europe since the Second World War, and which carries the risk of profound social impacts. However, such a step would only be possible in the event of a direct threat to the state's survival and in a situation of *escalation* that the Kremlin would have to justify to its own population.

Therefore, time is not on Russia's side, which, beyond the indispensable external support of China, could find itself in the situation of either raising the level of confrontation with Kyiv and the West in order to capitalize on the 'fear' effect and extract better negotiating conditions, or trying to freeze the conflict to buy time. However, to avoid misunderstanding, any interruption of the war should be considered temporary and partial, as Moscow would use that time to rebuild its industrial and military apparatus to launch a new and more structured offensive in the following months or years. In the meantime, the hybrid war campaign against Ukraine and the Euro-Atlantic bloc would continue, as the strategic objective of dividing and weakening the West would remain unchanged. Therefore, achieving lasting peace through compromise is not currently on Moscow's radar, especially in the absence of a battlefield defeat.

The element of military *defeat* should not be underestimated, both in general and specifically for the Russians. In fact, there is no lasting security architecture that does not emerge from an incontrovertible military result, such as to generate a clear imbalance between a winner and a loser that allows for the imposition of governance and a shared balance. Secondly, the wounds of the Cold War's unfavourable outcome, due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and not to its defeat on the battlefield at the hands of the Atlantic Alliance, are still open in Russian political consciousness and strategic culture. Moscow does not want a repetition of what happened in 1991, aware that a dishonourable retreat from Ukraine could coincide with the definitive decline of Russian power as we have known it since the mid-1800s.

This Russian stance should influence European behaviour and encourage the adoption of appropriate response strategies. At the moment, Europe seems inclined to bet on two events that are far from certain. The first is that the US's disengagement is only the result of Trump's excesses, not a systemic transformation of Washington's foreign policy. The Americans have Asia at the top of their list of priorities and may not be willing to commit to defending Europe as in the past, in a strategic trajectory begun by Obama and taken to extremes in terms of rhetoric and communication, rather than substance, by *the tycoon*. The second event is the economic and, therefore, political-military collapse of Russia and the consequent abdication of Putin and his power system. This calculation also seems rash, as the Russian collapse is not as close as it seems, and because it does not consider the risk of *escalation* as a card of Russian desperation and, above all, relies on the hope that the post-Putin era will be characterised by a liberal and democratic yearning that is by no means a foregone conclusion.

It follows that the only possible response for Europe is to take greater responsibility and be increasingly prepared to risk open conflict. While reforms and investments in the defence sector are now essential to improve deterrence and ensure the security and well-being of citizens, a change in the strategic and cultural paradigm is indispensable. Europe's ruling classes and civil society should no longer fear the return of the risk of war in public debate and in short-, medium-, and long-term

planning. Pretending that we do not live in a competitive and conflictual international environment will not change that environment and will, in fact, expose the continent to ever-increasing blackmail and threats from Russia. Therefore, the development of a greater degree of political and military autonomy from Washington, without, however, renouncing the Atlantic partnership and its advantages, must necessarily become the categorical imperative of European chancelleries and Brussels; otherwise, global strategic decline will continue.

In conclusion, the longer the war between Russia and Ukraine continues, the fewer options are available to the belligerents and their respective supporters. The military stalemate suggests that even in 2026, the road to negotiation will be uphill and a solution to the conflict will be a long way off. Even today, the most statistically and strategically likely scenario is that hostilities will continue until one of the contenders is exhausted. The real problem is what the parties will do when that moment arrives.

AUTORI

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