

POST-WAR PATHWAY:

PRINCIPLES FOR U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS AFTER UKRAINE

By the McCain Institute Russia Task Force

Executive Summary

Russia poses an enduring threat to vital U.S. national security interests, American allies, and the U.S.-led international order. Regardless of the outcome of the Ukraine war, Russia will remain a great power adversary of the United States. A Ukraine settlement will not change the underlying competitive dynamic in U.S.-Russia relations. Indeed, the wrong kind of peace in Ukraine or a retrenchment of U.S. power from Europe could invite further Russian aggression, increasing the likelihood of a broader conflict.

Putin's goals remain to diminish U.S. leadership; form a countervailing axis with American adversaries in China, Iran, and North Korea to overthrow the American-led international order; reconstitute the Russian empire; and build a spheres-of-influence world that undermines American security and alliances. Only a U.S. policy that confronts Putin with strength rather than appeasing him can produce a secure and sustainable peace in Europe.

The Russia Task Force convened a group of outstanding conservative national-security professionals to map the outlines of a post-Ukraine-war Russia strategy for the United States. Its recommendations for a postwar strategy towards Moscow include:

- Regardless of any Ukraine settlement, America must treat Russia as a great power adversary that must not be rewarded for its aggression. Supermajorities of Americans view Russia as an adversary and worry about its cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea; policymakers should follow their lead.
- Maintaining peace through strength requires a stronger NATO alliance; Europe must step up to defend the postwar peace, but a U.S. strategy of "leading from behind" will put American security at risk. Two world wars which began after the U.S. decoupled from Europe demonstrate the danger of doing so again.
- A peace settlement in Ukraine must deter not embolden further Russian aggression, with the United States reinforcing Europe's heightened defense posture. A sound settlement that upholds the Trump administration's objectives of "a free, sovereign, and secure Ukraine" will make it harder for Putin to restart the war in ways that threaten American lives and treasure.
- U.S. military power should be forward deployed in frontline NATO member states for defense and deterrence, alongside an increasingly robust European military posture. A pullback of capabilities risks inviting further Russian expansionism. Polling shows that Americans overwhelmingly support increasing the U.S. military presence in Eastern Europe to counter Russian aggression.

- All NATO allies should spend at least 5% of GDP on national security as agreed at the NATO Summit. The quality of this spending is as important as the quantity and includes increased defense industrial capacity and alliance interoperability. The United States should lead by example when it comes to defense spending.
- The outcome in Ukraine will impact security and stability in the Pacific. China is more likely to use armed aggression against Taiwan if Russia is successful in Ukraine due to waning U.S. commitment. Preventing Putin from winning in Ukraine by restoring deterrence in Europe will be essential to managing Chinese power in Asia. Ending the war in Europe will allow Washington to devote increased defense resources to the Indo-Pacific only if peace holds in Europe.
- A global spheres-of-influence arrangement that cedes strategic space to Russia and China will not protect American national security interests but will only embolden U.S. adversaries to challenge the United States in multiple theaters.
- Economic tools are as important as military ones in incentivizing peace; the U.S. should impose punitive sanctions on enablers of Putin's war, starting with China.
- America must sustain technology sanctions against the axis of aggressors; easing them on Russia to incentivize peace risks directly strengthening China's war machine against the United States and our Asian allies.
- Russia's $300 billion of sovereign assets abroad cannot be returned to Moscow but should be used to arm and rebuild Ukraine, demonstrating to China and others the consequences of aggression.
- The Trump administration's goal of American energy dominance should be deployed strategically to advance U.S. aims of peace and security in Europe and the Indo-Pacific; it is a national security tool that offers asymmetric advantage.
- The U.S. and Europe should invest in the independence of friendly front-line democracies; helping partners harden themselves against corrosive forms of Russian influence contributes to the security of NATO.
- To combat continuing Russian information and political warfare against the West, allies should use cyber, information, and political tools to go on offense, including by publicizing corruption and abuses of power within Russia.
- The Trump Administration's new approach to foreign assistance should counter anti-American authoritarian propaganda and Russian and Chinese influence operations, including through targeted democracy assistance and broadcasting.
- Congress can help drive a long-term strategy for a revanchist Russia, creating a Select Committee on Russia, legislating an annual requirement for what used to be called the Soviet Military Power Report, and investing in intelligence and digital tools to undermine Putin's power at home.

The Russia Task Force was led by Daniel Twining and included Bradley Bowman, Ian Brzezinski, Andrew Duncan, Dan Fata, Antonia Ferrier, Jamie Fly, Rebeccah Heinrichs, Fred Kagan, Paul Lettow, Aaron MacLean, Clifford May, Andrew Michta, Meaghan Mobbs, Alina Polyakova, Peter Rough, Leah Scheunemann, Nicole Bibbens Sedaca, Jan Surotchak, Corban Teague, Kurt Volker, and Roger Zakheim. Each participated in his or her personal capacity. This is a consensus document: while task force members endorse the general policy thrust and judgments reached by the group, they do not necessarily endorse every specific finding.

Post-War Pathway: Principles for U.S.-Russia Relations After Ukraine

"Russia poses an enduring threat to the United States, our NATO allies, and global security.This threat is intensified by Russia's strengthened relationships with the Chinese Communist Party, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Together, this group of adversaries seeks to undermine U.S. and Allied advantages and challenge our vital interests at home and abroad.... Russia's intention [is] to confront us into the foreseeable future....The deepening economic and military partnerships between Russia, the CCP, the DPRK, and Iran are indicative of a more intricate and global threat.... Russia's intention is clear – it seeks to destabilize European security, increase its regional and global power, and decrease U.S. global strength."

–***Gen. Christopher Cavoli***, *U.S. Army, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Apr. 8, 2025*

Russia Remains America's Great Power Adversary

Russia and China are working together to destroy the U.S.-led order, and China has sustained Russia's war machine in Ukraine. Some 80% of Americans perceive Russia as an adversary, 85% view Russia unfavorably, and 86% are concerned about its cooperation with U.S. adversaries in China, Iran, and North Korea. Preventing Putin from winning in Ukraine will strengthen Washington's hand against this axis of aggressors. Putin's Russia will remain an adversary of the United States following any settlement of the conflict in Ukraine – history shows that only Putin benefits when Washington attempts a "reset." The United States cannot afford a Ukraine peace deal that makes Russia great again, emboldening Putin to challenge America and setting the stage for further aggression. Beyond Ukraine, Putin will retain both the capability and the intent to threaten American NATO allies with both military conquest and hybrid warfare. Peace in Europe and deterrence of Russian armed aggression remain core interests of the United States, including to deter armed aggression in East Asia.

The Enduring Value of American Leadership

The United States must continue to lead NATO. "Leading from behind" does not produce security for the American people but rather its opposite. Just as Europe stepped up to provide more total assistance to wartime Ukraine than the United States, so must Europe step up to defend the postwar peace. But Europeans do not have the capability to do so on their own without continued American leadership and presence. Two world wars which began after the United States had decoupled from Europe demonstrate the danger to American security of doing so again. Letting Putin swallow Ukraine would increase the chances of a larger European war that would draw in American forces. Walking away from Ukraine would only precipitate a larger conflict threatening vital American interests. Peace through strength requires a strong U.S.-led NATO alliance.

The Imperative of a Good Peace, Not Peace at Any Price

A peace settlement in Ukraine must not create inadvertent incentives that embolden further Russian aggression in Europe. This means creating the conditions for both Ukraine and U.S. NATO allies to deter further Russian aggression. A “peace deal” that is not sustainable or that simply redirects Russian military aggression at a different target in Europe will have failed. A sound settlement of the Ukraine conflict that upholds the Trump administration’s objectives of “a free, sovereign, and secure Ukraine” will make it harder for Putin to restart the war in ways that threaten American lives and treasure. A good peace in Ukraine is about much more than the future of Ukraine and is directly tied to American national security. As Europe’s most formidable fighting force, a Ukraine tied to NATO and the West will be a source of transatlantic security.

Enhancing Deterrence

A settlement of the Ukraine conflict must bolster deterrence against Putin’s further imperialist designs. This includes strengthening NATO forces in Eastern Europe, including to frontline states such as Poland and the Baltic nations. American nuclear and missile forces should be forward deployed on the territory of frontline NATO allies for the purposes of defense and deterrence. Russia should not be rewarded for its aggression with either a U.S. or a NATO pullback of capabilities, which would be more likely to invite further Russian expansionism. Indeed, Americans support increasing the U.S. military presence in Eastern Europe to counter Russian aggression by a two-to-one margin. Western allies should continue to arm Ukraine after the shooting stops to deter a Russian restart of hostilities by rendering Ukraine an even harder target for Putin’s ambitions. The United States must aggressively counter Russia’s ability to threaten the U.S. homeland and critical infrastructure, including by investing in capabilities to neutralize Moscow’s anti-satellite weapons and counter Russian cyberattacks and information warfare.

A Five Percent Target for NATO Member Spending

As part of enhancing deterrence and sharing the burden, all NATO members should contribute a minimum of 3.5 percent of GDP to core defense requirements, as agreed at the June 2025 NATO Summit. All NATO members should produce an overall national security budget of at least five percent, incorporating spending on the protection of critical infrastructure, network defense, civil resilience, and a strengthened defense industrial

base. The quality of this spending is as important as the quantity and includes increased defense industrial capacity and alliance interoperability. New technologies of warfare demonstrated on the battlefields of Ukraine show how to hold off a larger Russian force; NATO can harden its defense of NATO territory by deploying similar technologies, including an integrated drone mesh network and enhanced missile defenses to defend the entirety of NATO's eastern flank, as well as both offensive and defensive cyber capabilities.

The Indivisibility of Deterrence in Europe & East Asia

Maintaining deterrence in Europe will be essential to the United States' ability to manage Chinese power in Asia. Ending the war in Europe and establishing a durable peace will allow the United States to devote increased national security resources to the Indo-Pacific theater. Investing in Ukraine's military and economic capacity will extend the peace by making it harder for Putin to attempt another invasion following any ceasefire – allowing the United States to increase its focus on Asia. Preventing Putin from "winning" in Ukraine through a sturdy peace that maintains Ukraine's freedom and sovereignty will send a powerful deterrent message to Beijing, reducing the chances of aggression against Taiwan. The substantial Chinese, Iranian, and North Korean contributions to Russia's war of conquest demonstrate that deterrence is not divisible, and that the United States confronts an axis of aggressors that must be countered across all domains of power in multiple theaters.

A Stronger NATO Not Spheres of Influence

The fact that Putin wishes to diminish and destroy NATO is a reminder of the alliance's strategic value and should lead the United States to strengthen the alliance to maintain peace. At the 2025 NATO summit, the Trump administration wisely recommitted to Article 5 to strengthen deterrence against Russian revanchism targeting NATO allies. American adversaries in China, Iran, and North Korea have armed and sustained Putin's war machine because they seek to undermine the U.S.-led order that Ukraine wants to join and strengthen. A spheres-of-influence arrangement between the United States, Russia, and China will not protect American national security interests, which are tied to the freedom and security of allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Adversary spheres of influence would build their power at U.S. expense and deprive the United States of market access that contributes to American prosperity. U.S. allies also provide the United States a decisive comparative advantage against our adversaries; abandoning allies would weaken American national security. The United States would be the loser, and China and Russia the winners, of any global spheres-of-influence arrangement.

Deploy Economic Tools to Uphold Deterrence

Economic tools will also be essential to deterring further Russian predation. NATO produces 50 percent of global GDP; Russia produces 2 percent. The United States controls the world's reserve currency.The U.S. dollar is used in 88 percent of global foreign exchange transactions. Any lifting of sanctions on Russia following a peace deal with Ukraine should be phased to ensure that Moscow complies with the terms of settlement. Sanctions relief must be accompanied by the promise to incapacitate the Russian economy in the event of further aggression, including through punitive secondary sanctions of nations that enable it, consistent with pending Congressional legislation. No country should enjoy impunity for sustaining Putin's war of aggression, which would not have been possible without the active support of China in particular; Beijing must be held accountable through punitive secondary sanctions. Economic instruments are as important as military ones in incentivizing peace.

Sustain Technology Sanctions Against the Axis of Aggressors

China has actively and strategically enabled Russia's war in Ukraine. Without Chinese technology and industrial supplies, Putin could not have kept up the fight. U.S. technology sanctions on Russia should not be eased in conditions of peace because of the inevitability of U.S. technology reaching China from Russia and strengthening China's war machine against the United States and our Asian allies. The same is true for Iran. Similarly, North Korea's battlefield support for Russia in Ukraine was premised on material and technology assistance from Moscow to Pyongyang. Any lifting of sanctions on Russia in the wake of a peace agreement with Ukraine must not strengthen the military capabilities of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. It also must not allow Russia to rapidly rearm in pursuit of further conquest, which will require continuing sanctions targeting Russia's defense industrial base, giving European allies more time to rearm to uphold deterrence.

Deploy Russian Assets to Arm & Rebuild Ukraine

Russia has forfeited the protection of its overseas sovereign assets under international law by launching a war of aggression. Russia's $300 billion in sovereign assets abroad should not be returned to Moscow's control but used to protect Ukraine against Russia's military onslaught and to rebuild Ukraine following the devastation caused by Russia's destruction of civilian infrastructure across the country. Seized Russian assets should be deployed to arm and rebuild Ukraine to help cover the cost of conflict and as a deterrent against future Russian wars of conquest. Using Russian assets to defend and rebuild Ukraine upholds

principles of justice and will serve as a deterrent to future acts of armed aggression by demonstrating the financial costs to the aggressor of seeking to revise international borders by force. Russian assets should be used to provide reparations to the victims of Putin's aggression in Ukraine, including the families of American volunteers killed in battle and the families of abducted Ukrainian children, who should be returned to their families.

Leveraging U.S. Energy Dominance

The Trump administration's stated goal of American energy dominance should be deployed to advance U.S. aims of peace and stability in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This means prioritizing energy sales to American allies and security partners, reducing their dependency on Russia and mitigating Moscow's ability to use energy as a weapon. Europe can never again make the mistake of sleepwalking into energy dependency on Russia, and the United States should insist on this as a top priority, particularly since America offers a competitive energy alternative. The United States' historic opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline should continue after the war, particularly since key European leaders including in Germany now oppose ever again making Europe hostage to Russian energy supply. The United States should ramp up oil production to bring down oil prices, handicapping the primary revenue source for Putin's aggression.

Shore Up the Front Lines of Freedom

Russia seeks to reconstitute the Russian empire and (with China) overthrow the U.S.-led order. The United States and Europe should raise the costs of aggression for Putin in order to prevent another Ukraine-style conflict. The West should politically, economically, and militarily support the independence of friendly front-line democracies, not only in Ukraine but in Moldova and Armenia, shore up NATO's southeastern flank in Romania and Bulgaria, counter Russian malign influence in the Balkans, and support freedom champions in Georgia and Belarus who oppose pro-Russian governments. Helping countries that want to join the West harden themselves against corrosive forms of Russian influence contributes to the security of NATO.

Fight Back in the Gray Zone

Putin's hybrid war against NATO members will not end when the Ukraine conflict does. Russia uses subversion, sabotage, cyberwar, and political corruption to divide NATO and undercut public support for standing against Russian aggression. Moscow currently pays

no price for running an ongoing and aggressive campaign of subversion against European and American critical infrastructure. Helping NATO members build political, economic, and cyber-resiliency to Russian gray-zone aggression is strategic. In the interest of deterring Russian hybrid attacks, allies should not simply play defense but use cyber, information, and political tools to go on offense, for instance by publicizing corruption and abuses of power in Russia for Russian audiences, publicly exposing Russian sabotage and subversion activities in Europe, and aggressively taking down state-sponsored Russian hacking operations.

Win the New Cold War by Combating Political Interference & Information Warfare

China and Russia are collaborating to wage information warfare and political interference operations targeting the United States, including in America's backyard in the Western Hemisphere. A priority of the Trump Administration's new approach to foreign assistance should be strengthening pro-American groups and local actors contesting anti-American authoritarian propaganda in countries of strategic interest to the United States, starting in Latin America. This includes democracy assistance to pro-American partners and broadcasting objective news to pierce the information bubble of America's authoritarian adversaries. Russia has had an open field in the Global South; the U.S. must outcompete it for political influence and access to critical resources. NATO allies must compete aggressively in the information space to contest Russia, China, and Iran's information wars against the West, including by countering adversarial propaganda with objective news about the failures of their regimes and the superiority of free societies.

The Role of the U.S. Congress

Members of Congress are responsive to voters. Polls show most Americans want Ukraine to win the war and believe Russia is an adversary of the United States. Supermajorities of Americans in both political parties support the U.S. military presence in Europe and American membership in NATO. Congress can help drive a long-term strategy to oppose a revanchist Russia, creating a Select Committee on Russia and legislating an annual requirement for what used to be called the Soviet Military Power Report. Congress could fund a Golden Dome missile defense for America to protect the American homeland from the nuclear blackmail Putin has repeatedly threatened. In addition to increasing the defense budget, Congress can invest in intelligence and digital tools to magnify and exploit Putin's fear of his own people.

RUSSIA TASK FORCE

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