

Global Strategic Loneliness as a New Factor in International Politics: Lessons from Ukraine and Challenges for Europe to US Foreign Policy

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This article introduces the concept of global strategic loneliness as a defining feature of contemporary international politics. It argues that the erosion of collective security mechanisms, the weakening of allied commitments, and the rise of transactional foreign policy have created a new stage in world order where states increasingly rely on autonomous survival. Using Ukraine as a case study, the authors demonstrate how the failure of international guarantees and the conditionality of Western support highlight the fragility of alliance systems. The analysis further explores the implications for Europe–United States relations, showing how shifts in American policy have accelerated debates on European strategic autonomy. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence, the study positions strategic loneliness as a systemic phenomenon shaping the balance of power and the architecture of global security in the 21st century.

Keywords: Strategic loneliness; international relations; collective security; Ukraine; Europe–US relations; strategic autonomy; alliance crisis; foreign policy transformation

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Introduction.

The subject of this study is the process of transformation of the modern system of international relations, characterized by the weakening of traditional allied ties and a decrease in the effectiveness of collective security mechanisms. The authors' concept of *global strategic loneliness* is used to designate a new stage of world order, in which the balance of power and security of states is determined not so much by alliance treaties as by their own ability to survive and achieve strategic autonomy.

The object of the study is the international political structure of the 21st century, reflecting the transition from a model of collective security to a fragmented multi-centered world, using the example of the Ukrainian conflict and changes in transatlantic relations.

The purpose of this study is to identify and understand the phenomenon of *global strategic loneliness* as a new pattern in international politics, reflecting a crisis of collective guarantees, the erosion of allied commitments, and the return of states to a model of autonomous survival. The study aims to demonstrate how the Ukrainian war was not only a consequence of this trend but also its catalyst, shifting the balance between Europe and the United States and accelerating the transition from allied idealism to a pragmatic, transactional foreign policy.

Main tasks of the research:

1. To theoretically substantiate the concept of global strategic loneliness and reveal it as a symptom of a profound transformation of the global system, in which trust gives way to calculation.
2. Using the example of the Ukrainian crisis, analyze the limits of the effectiveness of international guarantees and understand why even formally enshrined obligations do not provide protection.
3. Show how American policy under Donald Trump has changed the logic of transatlantic relations from a system of collective responsibility to a system of individual benefit.
4. Assess whether Europe can learn from the Ukrainian experience and turning "strategic loneliness" into an impetus for building its own defense and political agency.
5. Formulate a broader conclusion: how the phenomenon of state loneliness becomes the basis for a new world order – a world where security is determined not by alliances, but by the degree of internal stability and independence of states.

The level of research on the subject. The phenomenon of *global strategic loneliness* has not yet received a systematic analysis in academic literature and is mostly used as a journalistic metaphor. However, certain aspects of it have already been reflected in works devoted to the crisis of collective security, the decline in trust between allies, and the changing logic of the leading powers' foreign policy.

Thus, in the analytical report by Emma Ashford, "*Entangling Alliances? Europe, the United States, Asia, and the Risk of a New 1914,*" draws a parallel between the current state of international alliances and the geopolitical mistakes of the early 20th century. The researcher emphasizes that an excessive density of mutual obligations without a coordinated strategy increases the likelihood of a crisis of trust and strategic vulnerability in Europe, forcing the United States to engage in conflicts selectively and situationally (Ashford, 2023).

Similar conclusions are developed in analytical publications of the Atlantic Council: in the article “*Europe Has the Resources to Defend Itself and Support Ukraine Against Russia*” emphasizes that Europe theoretically has the necessary capabilities for independent defense, but the political will and institutional mechanisms for its implementation remain limited (Atlantic Council, 2025a). In the article “*What Europeans think about Trump’s approach to Ukraine (and what they can do next)*” shows that the actions of the Donald Trump administration have provoked doubts in Europe about the reliability of American security guarantees and accelerated the debate about the need for European “strategic autonomy” (Atlantic Council, 2025b).

Daniel Karlovskiy examines the limitations and conditionality of international security guarantees using Ukraine as an example in his article “*Post-War Ukraine: Budapest Memorandum 2.0 Will Not Work*,” published in the European Leadership Network. The researcher notes that the 1994 document had primarily symbolic meaning and did not contain effective protection mechanisms, because of which it failed to prevent either the annexation of Crimea or the full-scale invasion of 2022. According to the author, “the very term ‘security guarantees’ has lost its meaning in the absence of the political will to ensure them” (Karlovskiy, 2023).

The theme of the discrepancy between the growth of military spending and the EU’s institutional effectiveness is developed by Michael Bartz and Jörn Collmer in their study “*Military Spending for European Security – How Much is Enough?*” The authors demonstrate that even with increasing defense budgets and strengthening NATO structures, Europe remains dependent on American technological and intelligence infrastructure. They conclude that the key constraint on European autonomy is not economics, but the lack of a single strategic decision-making center (Bartz & Kollmer, 2024). These observations are complemented by a series of reports from the European Commission (*European Commission, 2025a–e*), which explicitly note that the PESCO and EDIRPA initiatives, despite expanding European productive capacity, are unable to eliminate structural dependence on the United States in matters of military integration and defense planning.

The problem of the imbalance and situational nature of Western military aid to Ukraine is also examined in detail by Jakub Olchowski in his analytical commentary “*Western Military Aid to Ukraine: Crisis Management Instead of Strategy*,” published by the Institute of Central Europe. The author notes that decisions to provide support were made primarily based on current political circumstances, making the aid policy reactive rather than strategic. According to his observation, this “crisis response” model led to arms supplies and financial injections being dependent on electoral cycles and domestic political debates in donor countries, rather than on a unified long-term plan (Olchowski, 2024).

The issue of weakening allied guarantees and the transition of European states to a policy of strategic autonomy is discussed in detail in leading contemporary Western publications. For example, in the article “*Poland Gears for War*” (Politico, 2024) analyzes the accelerated militarization of Polish security policy: the authors note that Warsaw has set the goal of creating “the strongest army in Europe” by increasing military spending to 4-5% of GDP, expanding the conscription force, and modernizing the military training system. This course is explained not only by direct threats from Russia but also by the awareness of the limitations of external guarantees, especially after the Ukrainian experience (Politico, 2024).

The article “*Ukraine Ceasefire Will Strengthen Russian Threat in Baltic Region, Ministers Warn*” emphasizes that the governments of the Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – view any possible concessions to Ukraine as a direct risk to their own security. The authors point to a trend toward accelerated growth in military budgets and an increase in reserve forces,

as well as disappointment in the effectiveness of NATO mechanisms amid declining American involvement (Financial Times, 2025).

A series of analytical papers by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy examine the quantitative dynamics of international support for Ukraine. In the report “*Europe Would Have to Mobilize 300,000 Troops to Defend Against Russia Without US Involvement*,” researchers model a possible military conflict scenario and conclude that Europe’s defense potential remains critically dependent on American military infrastructure, technology, and intelligence. Another project, “*Ukraine Support Tracker*,” systematizes information on aid provided to Ukraine, including financial, military, and humanitarian packages. The authors document the dependence of support volumes on domestic political cycles and electoral fluctuations in donor countries, indicating a weakening of the principle of collective responsibility and the growing transactional nature of alliance commitments (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2025a; 2025b).

The shift in the logic of American foreign policy is clearly evident in a series of publications by the Associated Press, which examine the Donald Trump administration’s approach to alliances and defense commitments. The article “*The Pentagon’s pause in arms sales to Ukraine is part of a global stockpile review*” notes that the United States has begun to review military resource allocation mechanisms with a focus on domestic needs (Associated Press, 2025a). The article “*Trump Administration Resumes Deliveries of Certain Weapons to Ukraine After Pentagon Pause*” demonstrates the inconsistency of decisions. And the article “*Trump said his obligations under NATO’s Article 5 depend on ‘how you define it’*” documents the de facto US departure from the traditional concept of guaranteed collective defense (Associated Press, 2025b–c). These trends reflect Washington’s shift from value-based and ideological leadership to a model of pragmatic bargaining within alliance relations. Similar observations are found in articles in *The Guardian* (2025a; 2025b), which discuss the “crisis of trust within the West,” and in an analytical piece in *The Wall Street Journal* (2025), which analyzes Washington’s use of intelligence and arms supplies as a tool to pressure allies.

International reports and studies also provide the empirical basis for understanding the crisis of international security guarantees. In the report of the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (“*Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine, 1 February – 31 July 2025*”) tens of thousands of civilian casualties are recorded, demonstrating the failure of existing international protection mechanisms (United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, 2025). And the study of Michael Schwirtz and Eric Schmitt “*The death toll in the war in Ukraine is approaching 1.4 million, a study has found*,” based on data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), confirms the scale of human losses and the limitations of external support, especially in the context of the protracted nature of the war (Schwirtz & Schmitt, 2025).

Thus, the existing literature has accumulated significant evidence describing the fragmentation of alliances, the weakening of transatlantic ties, and the growing strategic autonomy of middle powers. However, these studies are fragmented and do not consider these developments as manifestations of a unified process – *global strategic loneliness*. This paper fills this gap by combining theoretical approaches and empirical data into a unified analytical framework, in which the Ukrainian case is considered as an indicator of a new stage in global politics.

Today, the world’s major powers, even while formally part of military alliances, in practice act as independent, “neutral” players – not committing themselves to strict obligations to their

partners and prioritizing their own interests. The world has effectively entered an era of strategic solitude for all countries: previous guarantees and alliance promise cease to be effective if they conflict with the priorities of leading global players. Specifically, any commitments to partners that conflict with the interests of the major powers are simply postponed or ignored – whether in matters of security, economics, tariff policy, or other areas of international relations.

We already live in a state of strategic loneliness, where strong states enjoy unlimited opportunities – due to their nuclear potential, economic might, and military resources, while weak and medium-sized states face significant risks, though not yet fully understood. Weak and medium-sized countries still harbor illusions that they will be protected by international law or alliance commitments within military or economic blocs, be it the EU or NATO. But in practice, these commitments often prove insufficiently robust and fail to materialize, as the situation in Ukraine has demonstrated. Ukraine, which for many years was actively invited to become part of the Western world – through an association agreement with the EU, through deepening cooperation with NATO, through campaigns to cultivate Western elites and forge a new identity – has ultimately found itself in a state of strategic loneliness. The volume of aid, the level of support, and actual cooperation with Ukraine are always determined solely by the selfish interests of its partners, rather than by any universal principles, rules of the game, or alliance commitments.

In general, the model of strategic loneliness can be described as follows: the domestic situation of a given large country shapes its national interests in foreign policy. At the same time, internal dynamics remain unstable and are influenced by various factors – from cycles of economic growth and crisis, social and demographic changes, to ideological shifts in public consciousness. The development of civilization accelerates these processes: technological advances, globalization, new forms of communication, and much more often exacerbate internal and external contradictions. As a result, national interests are constantly changing, leading to economic and political rebalancing not only at the level of individual states but also of entire regions – for example, in the shifting balance of power between Western countries and the Global South.

As soon as the domestic situation in a country changes – for example, in the United States, amid the migration crisis or economic problems (which helped US President D. Trump win the election again) – the public's demand for foreign policy, and foreign policy itself, also changes, especially in the context of competitive political systems.

Expecting any country to adhere to a unified foreign policy strategy for 10–20 years is becoming virtually impossible: a change in government, amidst intensifying foreign policy competition and new economic and military crises, always leads to a change in course. Structures like NATO or the EU have existed for decades, but the level of involvement of member countries and the depth of their actual cooperation are constantly changing. Internal turbulence within countries and alliances is likely to only increase due to deterioration of global economic market conditions and increasing security risks. This is precisely why all states today find themselves in a situation of strategic loneliness. For the largest powers, this situation is more certain and reinforced by their own potential, whereas for medium-sized and small states, especially those already embroiled in military-economic conflicts, strategic loneliness is only intensifying and is associated with a high degree of uncertainty and the inability to significantly influence the course of events.

The world of global strategic solitude is the new reality of international relations. In the 21st century, the international system is increasingly moving away from the traditional logic of

collective security, alliances, and allied commitments. Today, even the largest states – members of military or economic blocs – behave as decidedly non-bloc actors, guided primarily by the pragmatics of their own interests. Mechanisms that promised to ensure predictability and security through guarantees and long-term commitments have proven ineffective if these commitments conflict with the current interests of key powers. Regardless of formal agreements, if the situation within a major power change (be it a crisis, an electoral cycle, or economic turbulence), national interests will always prevail, and previous promises can be quickly revised or forgotten.

This evolution of the international environment is particularly evident in what we might call the era of global strategic loneliness. Promises of collective defense and alliances, whether NATO, the EU, or other formats – no longer provide countries with a solid foundation. Actual decisions about support, assistance, or intervention are now based on ad hoc calculations and national egoism, rather than shared responsibility or solidarity. This has been most dramatically demonstrated by the example of Ukraine: despite years of promises of integration into the Western community, despite years of cultivating the Western elite and a massive information campaign, the extent of support for Kyiv is always determined by the interests of Western countries, not by universal principles or moral obligations. Ukraine is only the most obvious example: its situation has become a marker of the crisis of all alliance systems and the credibility of international guarantees.

In the new model of international relations, the domestic situation and dynamics of key states directly shape not only their foreign policy but also the fate of smaller and medium-sized countries embroiled in conflicts or crises. Changes in power, electoral preferences, and economic upheavals all immediately impact the behavior of powers on the global stage, making any long-term strategy of allies extremely fragile. Even structures such as NATO or the EU, while maintaining formal unity, essentially become arenas for competition and fragmentation of interests.

Paradoxically, in conditions of strategic loneliness, strong states gain new opportunities to act independently: possessing nuclear weapons and economic and military potential, they can impose their agenda without regard for previous alliances. For medium and small states – especially those embroiled in conflict (like Ukraine) – this era promises uncertainty, increased vulnerability, and the need to rely primarily on their own resources, autonomy, and the search for flexible, ad hoc alliances. The illusion of the reliability of international law, universal guarantees, and block based protection is increasingly shattered by the reality of egoism and volatility of great powers. As a result, global strategic loneliness is becoming more than just a political term, but a key factor in the modern world order, in which every state – even one formally part of an alliance – must be prepared for a scenario in which, at a critical moment, it finds itself alone in the face of security, economic, or political challenges. It is this new reality that demands a revision of both national strategies and the entire architecture of international security.

Global strategic loneliness: the experience of Ukraine

1. The Ukrainian war has shown that external security guarantees, even the most authoritative ones (the Budapest Memorandum, NATO and EU promises), do not provide complete protection.

Ukraine has seen in practice that external security “guarantees” do not provide reliable protection. Having signed the Budapest Memorandum in 1994 and renounced the world’s third-

largest nuclear arsenal, Kyiv counted on commitments from Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom (later joined by France and China) to respect its sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, the Budapest Memorandum was not legally binding and proved to be more of a political symbol: it failed to provide Ukraine with effective defense mechanisms when faced with external aggression. In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and then launched a full-scale invasion in 2022, none of the document's signatories provided Kyiv with direct military support; the West's response was limited to sanctions and diplomatic statements, which clearly does not correspond to the concept of a "security guarantee" (Karlovskiy, 2023).

The renunciation of nuclear weapons without adequate security guarantees laid a "mine" under the entire statehood of Ukraine and doomed the country to destabilization, active external interference in its internal political affairs and, as a result, a Russian invasion, destruction and losses of almost \$1 trillion (Ekonomichna Pravda, 2025).

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) (as of August 13, 2025) (United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, 2025) documented the deaths of at least 13,883 civilians, including 726 children, and 35,548 wounded, including 2,234 children. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, about 400,000 Ukrainian military personnel have been killed or wounded since the war began (The New York Times, 2025).

According to the UN (United Nations, 2024), by November 2024, there are 6.8 million Ukrainian refugees worldwide. Of these, 6.2 million are registered in Europe and another 560,200 outside of it. As of August 2024, 3.67 million Ukrainians had fled their homes and found temporary refuge in their own country.

Ukraine's nuclear renunciation alone cost the country \$250 billion (REN TV, 2020). At that time, there remained on Ukrainian territory: 130 UR-100N intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) with six warheads each, 46 RT-23 Molodets ICBMs with ten warheads each, as well as 38 heavy bombers - a total of about 1,700 warheads. Now the country's nuclear status would help avoid a catastrophe.

Similarly, previous promises regarding Ukraine's integration into Western structures proved unfulfilled. Back in 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, Kyiv was promised future membership in the Alliance, but without a specific plan or timeline. Essentially, Ukraine was relegated to NATO's "waiting room" – the Kremlin realized that while the door was formally open, Kyiv lacked the protective umbrella of Article 5 on collective defense (Reuters, 2023). Worse, this uncertainty became the worst of two options: Moscow received a signal that Ukraine would one day become a NATO member, but at that point, it was not under the Alliance's protection. This strategic quagmire deprived it of direct guarantees: when the invasion began, Ukraine remained outside the bloc, and NATO as an organization did not enter the war – only individual countries provided military support on a bilateral basis. Thus, Ukraine's experience demonstrated that grand international agreements and promises of integration may not work at a critical moment: if they conflict with the interests of the powerful, their observance is not guaranteed. For other medium-sized states, this leads to a clear conclusion: legal treaties and assurances from allies are valuable only on paper, while real security must be provided by the countries themselves.

2. Western support was significant in volume but fragmented and highly dependent on the internal political and electoral cycles of the partners.

The course of the Russian-Ukrainian war is decisively determined by the scale and regularity of military and financial support from Western partners. Although the allied aid to Ukraine has been unprecedented in volume, its structure has demonstrated fragmentation and strong dependence on the domestic political situation in donor countries. Over the course of more than three years of war (2022–2025), the total volume of military, financial, and humanitarian support has exceeded €280 billion. According to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (March – June 2025) (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2025b), total commitments from international donors amounted to over €280 billion, equivalent to an average of €80 billion annually. Western aid to Ukraine currently consists primarily of budgetary macrofinancial investments (EU, IMF) and in-kind arms deliveries (USA, UK, Germany, etc.), while direct funding for the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense is virtually nonexistent.

Of the total, approximately €140 billion (50%) was allocated for military aid, approximately €120 billion (43%) for financial support, and €20 billion (7%) for humanitarian aid. Europe (€167 billion) clearly outspent the US (€114 billion) in overall aid to Ukraine. It also surpassed the US in total military aid, amounting to €74 billion compared to €65 billion from the US.

From the beginning of the full-scale war in 2022, the United States was Ukraine's key partner and donor until 2025. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the US Congress has approved military and economic aid to Ukraine and its allies totaling at least \$175 billion. Total military and economic aid to Ukraine (all instruments, including PDA, USAI, FMF, budget financing, humanitarian and economic grants) is approximately \$75–78 billion from the US alone from 2022 to January 2025 (various estimates put the figure at up to \$81 billion).

However, following the shift in the political balance in the United States and the accession of Donald Trump and his Republican team to power in January 2025, Washington embarked on a course of action aimed at ending hostilities and gradually scaling back military support for Ukraine or shifting it to Europe. This dramatically increased uncertainty for Ukraine's defense and called into question the sustainability of the entire system of external support.

Currently, European governments spend an average of just 0.1 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) per year on bilateral aid to Ukraine. To offset US support, the contribution of all EU states and institutions would have to increase to 0.21 percent of GDP – a level that the Baltic and Scandinavian countries have already significantly exceeded. In absolute terms, this would mean an increase in European aid from the current €44 billion per year to €82 billion.

Overall, aid to Ukraine was not the product of a pre-calculated long-term strategy, but rather a response to a crisis, often subject to fluctuations due to domestic political factors. Western military aid was fragmented and largely ad hoc. Decisions were made under the influence of momentary considerations and discussions, and not within the framework of a unified plan (Olchowski, 2024). In other words, support proved unsystematic: its scale and pace changed abruptly in response to events at the front or political cycles in the donor countries themselves.

For example, in the spring of 2023, on the eve of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, the US and its allies announced large arms packages, and by the spring of 2024, before the change of power in Washington, the US administration rushed to approve additional tranches of aid, knowing about a possible change in course (Cancian & Park, 2025). Thus, internal strife in the United States in the fall of 2023 led to the freezing of the latest support package, which immediately affected Ukraine's position on the front lines. For almost eight months – until a new decision was made – Ukraine was effectively deprived of fresh supplies from the United

States, and this allowed Russia to take advantage of the pause (Olchowski, 2024). According to analysts, during this period, the Ukrainian Armed Forces experienced a growing shortage of ammunition and weapons, which European allies were unable to fully compensate for. As a result, Russia felt more confident: its troops intensified offensive operations, taking advantage of the Ukrainian army's forced resource conservation. Only in early 2024 was the aid blockage lifted, largely after internal party discussions in Washington and pressure from allies.

This episode demonstrated how political turbulence in the West can have direct military consequences: the lack of systemic support is turning into strategic risks for Ukraine.

With the advent of the Donald Trump administration, Washington's policy shifted dramatically – from leadership in aid to restraint. The very first months of the new administration were marked by the US effectively ceasing free arms supplies to Ukraine. For the first time since the war began, the American government approved only commercial arms sales to Kyiv, which Ukraine must pay for itself, instead of direct military aid (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2024). In other words, a market-based system of allied support was established. Simultaneously, Europe was forced to increase its contribution to Ukraine (The Guardian, 2025b).

Experience shows that even a temporary pause in aid deliveries to Ukraine has a negative impact on the front and a demoralizing effect on the military and society.

As a result of D. Trump's first suspension of aid to Ukraine (in March 2025), the ability of Ukrainian troops to fight on Russian territory became significantly more difficult. Not only were new arms deliveries frozen, but intelligence sharing between the US and Ukraine was also completely suspended (The Wall Street Journal, 2025), including access to key satellite imagery, electronic intelligence, and signals intelligence. This component of Western support proved crucial for Ukraine: despite their significant contributions, European allies were unable to fully compensate for the loss of American intelligence, operational information, and satellite tracking. In the context of modern warfare, this critically limited Ukraine's ability to fight and led to a deterioration of the situation on the battlefield.

Thus, while at the peak of the offensive in the Kursk region (August 2024), Ukraine controlled more than 1,000 square kilometers of territory in the Kursk region (within the territory of the Russian Federation), by early June 2025, the Kursk bridgehead had been virtually completely lost. Meanwhile, in April 2025, Russian troops launched an offensive in the Sumy region in northern Ukraine and, as of early July 2025, controlled 208 square kilometers.

On July 1, 2025, the United States temporarily suspended critical weapons supplies to Ukraine for the second time (Associated Press, 2025a). The official reason for the suspension was a logistical review: at the direction of President Donald Trump, the Pentagon had to "review its weapons stockpiles" following the recent airstrikes on Iranian targets in June. As of July 9, it became known that the United States had resumed sending some types of weapons, including 155 mm shells, GMLRS rockets and Patriot systems (Associated Press, 2025b). It is important to emphasize that this time, it was not a complete halt to aid: the US continued to fulfill its previous commitments, maintaining intelligence and analytical capabilities, targeting, and missile early warning systems. Overall, this concerned arms deliveries from the packages adopted under Donald Biden (and which are now ending). The US still has \$3.8 billion in PDA funds at its disposal (The Kyiv Independent, 2025). Russian troops also took advantage of the situation and accelerated their advance to 3 square kilometers per day in certain areas, including in the Donetsk region (Institute for the Study of War, 2025).

Thus, Domestic political changes in a key ally (the United States) have directly impacted the format and sustainability of support for Ukraine: alliance commitments have proven flexible and dependent on the electoral cycle. Each new election cycle could mean a reassessment of aid – from generosity to austerity – based on national interests and voter demands. Strategically, this confirms the thesis: the foreign policies of major powers are selfish and fickle, while medium-sized countries cannot rely on the long-term stability of their alliances. Ukraine, like other countries in a similar situation, must navigate these conditions, seeking to secure support now but with no guarantees for tomorrow.

3. The Ukrainian case has reinforced the feeling among many countries that at a critical moment they may be left without external support.

The Ukrainian experience has sobered other countries in many ways, forcing them to question whether their allies will come to their aid at a decisive moment. If a country that had been urged to join the “Western community” for years was effectively left alone to face the aggressor in the critical early days of the war, how reliable are the promises of security for others? This question is increasingly being heard both in Europe and beyond. Strategic loneliness has transformed from an abstract concept into a real feeling for many leaders and nations.

The Ukrainian experience has become a serious warning for other states, forcing them to ask: can they count on allies at a critical moment? If a country that had been actively integrated into the “Western community” for many years finds itself alone against an enemy in the first days of full-scale aggression, how credible are the security guarantees for others? This dilemma is being increasingly discussed not only in Europe but also beyond its borders. Strategic loneliness has ceased to be a theoretical concept and has become a reality, felt at the level of political elites and societies.

In Europe, especially among countries bordering Russia, there is a growing understanding that an “automatic” security guarantee no longer exists. Eastern European states, which until recently relied entirely on the might of NATO and the United States, have begun an accelerated buildup of their own defense capabilities. Poland has declared a commitment to creating “Europe’s strongest army,” increasing military spending to 4-5% of GDP in response to the threat posed by Russia and the lessons of Ukraine (Politico, 2024). The Baltic states are expanding their territorial defense forces and conducting large-scale reservist maneuvers (Financial Times, 2025). In France, Germany, and Italy, discussions about increasing defense spending and reducing dependence on the United States have entered the mainstream, whereas previously they were only sporadic. These changes reflect a general awareness that if the United States reduces its involvement, Europe itself could find itself in a situation like Ukraine’s.

It’s no coincidence that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared in the spring of 2025 the need to “take much greater responsibility for our own European security,” unveiling a plan for unprecedented €840 billion in EU defense investments (Atlantic Council, 2025a). Such initiatives stem from the realization that transatlantic unity is no longer a guarantee: the Trump administration has already demonstrated a willingness to reduce US involvement in European affairs, even to the point of pausing military support for Ukraine. Against this backdrop, faith in the steadfastness of alliance commitments is rapidly eroding, and European capitals are beginning to believe that in matters of security, they must rely primarily on their own resources.

In Europe – especially in countries directly bordering Russia – there is a growing understanding that the default security guarantee no longer applies. Eastern European states, which until recently relied on the strength of NATO and the United States, are now rapidly expanding their own defense capabilities. For example, Poland has announced a plan to build “the most powerful army in Europe” and has sharply increased its military budget (to 4–5% of GDP) in response to the Russian threat and based on the lessons of Ukraine (Politico, 2024). The Baltic states are increasing the size of their territorial defense forces and conducting large-scale reserve exercises (Financial Times, 2025). In France, Germany, and Italy, discussions about increasing defense spending and reducing dependence on the United States are no longer taboo, whereas previously such a topic was raised timidly. These processes reflect a general awareness: Europe could be the next to suffer a shortage of external support if the United States distances itself. It is no wonder that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared in the spring of 2025 the need to “take much greater responsibility for our own European security,” proposing an unprecedented €840 billion investment plan for EU defense (Atlantic Council, 2025a). This decisive step is dictated by concern that transatlantic unity is no longer guaranteed: the Trump administration has signaled its intention to reduce US involvement in European affairs, even to the point of pausing military aid to Ukraine. Against the backdrop of these signals, faith in the inviolability of allied commitments is rapidly fading, and European capitals are awakening to a new reality in which they must rely primarily on themselves.

Even the progress of peace talks on Ukraine is becoming a marker of the growing divergence of positions within the Western bloc – between the US and Europe. Large-scale negotiations in Alaska (August 15, 2025) (BBC News, 2025b), and then in Washington (August 18, 2025) (BBC News, 2025 a), organized by US President Donald Trump (The Guardian, 2025a), gave hope for a quick resolution and the long-awaited end to the war. According to Washington, at that time, the key demands of the parties boiled down to two main issues: territorial concessions (Moscow insisted on the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from the unoccupied part of Donbas) and the provision of security guarantees to Ukraine (The Matt Gaetz Show, 2024).

But after just a few days, the negotiation process again reached its original deadlock, and the parties returned to their previous ultimatum positions (Kenya Star, 2024). Perhaps the biggest mistake US President Donald Trump made as the primary mediator of the peace settlement between Russia and Ukraine was his failure to formalize the political concessions he had made, even in the form of a memorandum. The concessions Moscow made in Alaska and the agreements discussed with Ukraine and its European partners in Washington remained mere words and were not formalized. This was because the US, while acting as the main organizer of the negotiations, refused to assume any political responsibility despite its active participation. However, to advance the negotiations, Donald Trump must move from symbolic gestures to real diplomacy: offer Russia and Ukraine a package of agreements that includes security guarantees and economic mechanisms that could offset the costs of compromise. For Moscow and Kyiv, any peace agreement at this stage would entail serious reputational losses compared to the inflated expectations of society. Therefore, both sides require a concrete balance of interests and compensatory instruments. Only if the US President is willing to personally sign a document (with a clear set of guarantees and compensation mechanisms) together with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will there be a chance of reaching a real agreement.

At the same time, serious doubts are growing in Europe about Donald Trump's willingness to impose sanctions against Russia or undertake any other commitments. The meeting of the "coalition of the willing" in Paris on September 4, 2025 (Reuters, 2025b), at which a model for security guarantees for Ukraine was discussed, revealed that the negotiation process was stuck in limbo. The meeting failed to yield any significant results: the key question – US participation in the guarantee's system – remained unanswered.

Instead, D. Trump accused Europeans of continuing to purchase Russian oil (Reuters, 2025d) and called for focusing efforts on pressure against China. A paradoxical situation is emerging: Europeans are discussing the possibility of introducing troops as an instrument for future security guarantees for Ukraine, but this can only be realized with US support and Russia's consent. Without American involvement, European promises are meaningless, and Moscow has already made it clear that it will not consent to the presence of Western troops in Ukraine (Reuters, 2025c).

It is possible that the very idea of sending troops into Ukraine is being used as part of a political game aimed at persuading the United States to support the project. European partners understand from the outset that Russia will refuse, and in that case, they are counting on the imposition of tough American sanctions against Moscow. However, Donald Trump is still playing the role of arbitrator without any real action. This only perpetuates the perception of impasse and increases the risk that negotiations will be used as a tool for political manipulation rather than a genuine path to peace. It remains unlikely that Trump will completely withdraw from the peace dialogue in Ukraine or return to the strategy of the previous Biden administration, as both Europe and Ukraine would like. Such a move would signify a political defeat for Trump and an admission of the failure of his own settlement model.

It should be emphasized that, given the war in Ukraine, the priorities of the US and Europe diverge. For Washington, the key threat is not Russia, but China. Beijing is increasing its influence among countries in the Global South through new diplomatic initiatives, holding large-scale military parades (Reuters, 2025a), and demonstrating its willingness to claim the role of center of global governance. (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Ukraine, 2025). This is precisely what heightens the concerns of Donald Trump and the Republican elite: in their perception, the real adversary is not Moscow, weakened by the war and long-term rebuilding, but China, which is growing its economic might and gaining ground in key technologies.

In this situation, Trump and his administration are unwilling to waste resources on a protracted confrontation with Russia, as, according to their logic, this only plays into China's hands, buying time and strengthening its position. However, such distancing by the United States creates a vulnerability in Europe, which is seriously concerned about its own security and the prospect of a possible future confrontation with Russia.

European states view Russia as a growing threat and are interested in containing it as much as possible – by returning the United States to its previous policy of supporting Ukraine and increasing sanctions pressure on the Kremlin. But the Trump administration is actively resisting these efforts.

When European partners insist on introducing new sanctions against Russia, Washington responds with a counter-demand (Reuters, 2025d): The EU must be consistent and, above all, independently abandon Russian energy imports. The American logic is simple: Europe wants the US to take the lead in escalating tensions, while continuing to maintain channels of

economic interaction with Moscow. Washington's response is a direct signal to Brussels: "You want our toughness? First, demonstrate yours."

In this way, US President Donald Trump is shifting responsibility for the escalation of sanctions to the European Union while simultaneously preserving his own room for maneuver. This is a form of controlled distancing: Trump is demonstrating to his allies that he does not intend to be a "sponsor of war" and will participate only to the extent that it benefits the United States.

It's important to note that the sense of vulnerability of American allies in the face of an aggressor extends far beyond Europe. Around the world, middle and small powers are rethinking their security strategies. US allies in Asia – for example, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea – are (Livermore, 2024) – they are closely watching the events in Ukraine. The Taiwanese see that Ukraine, not in a formal military alliance with the US, has not received direct military intervention from NATO, and although the West is providing weapons, it has had to fight the war itself. This lesson is prompting Taipei to strengthen its own defenses in case assistance is delayed or limited. Analysts are blunt: Taiwan should proceed from the understanding that at a critical moment, it "is solely responsible for its own defense" and must rely primarily on its own forces (Glaeser, 2022). Others have reached similar conclusions. In South Korea, public support for acquiring its own nuclear weapons is growing (The New York Times, 2024) – largely influenced by the Ukrainian case, where a country that voluntarily renounced its nuclear potential was attacked, and the guarantees proved fictitious. Middle Eastern states are also reconsidering their alliances: traditional American partners, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, are demonstrating greater independence and establishing relationships with alternative powers (China, Russia), realizing that Washington may not come to the rescue if it does not align with its current interests.

Thus, many countries today have a heightened sense of strategic loneliness, inspired by the Ukrainian experience. International law, multilateral alliances, and "loud declarations of support" are no longer perceived as a reliable shield. Every power is preparing for the worst-case scenario – that at the last minute, it might be left alone against an aggressor. This atmosphere of mistrust is eroding the foundations of the old collective security system. While just a decade ago, NATO membership or a friendship treaty was perceived as a guarantee, now even the world's number-one allies are asking: *what if the alliance fails?* As a result, the world has entered an era where the fear of being left without support is becoming a significant political factor, pushing countries toward an arms race, the search for new alliances "just in case," and the pursuit of maximum military independence.

The main lesson Ukraine has taught the world is that a state's survival depends primarily on its own resilience and ability to resist, not on external guarantees. In the first days of the full-scale attack, it was the resilience of Ukrainians – from the top leadership to ordinary citizens – that played a decisive role. President Zelenskyy, by refusing to evacuate and remaining in Kyiv, mobilized the nation's will to defend itself. The Ukrainian army, which had endured the crucible of the eight-year war in Donbas, did not falter in the face of superior enemy forces. In addition to regular troops, territorial defense units and volunteers played a crucial role, rallying en masse to defend cities. Analysts note that the effective mobilization of territorial defense forces significantly slowed the Russian advance at the beginning of the invasion and thwarted their plans to seize Kyiv with lightning speed (Livermore, 2024). This provided the army with precious time to regroup and for the first shipments of Western weapons to arrive. Simply put, if not for Ukraine's internal resilience – high morale, the population's willingness to resist,

and previous military reforms – no external promises would have saved the country. Ukraine survived thanks primarily to itself, and international aid only began to be effective when it became clear that Ukrainians were not giving up.

Europe may soon have to test the logic of “own resilience versus foreign guarantees.” If tomorrow, for whatever reason (a political crisis in the US, an isolationist turn, or some other emergency), America is unable or unwilling to fulfill its allied functions, for example, sharing intelligence, patrolling the skies, or directing deterrent forces, Europe will face a similar security vacuum. Will it be able to fill it on its own?

In the context of the Trump era, this takes on urgency: European leaders are openly talking about the need to take their defense into their own hands before it's too late (Atlantic Council, 2025a). This means increasing military production, investing in intelligence capabilities, developing missile defense, and other critical elements that were previously largely provided by the United States. For example, without American satellites and drones, the European Union will need to strengthen its satellite constellation and data exchange among its members. Without the certainty of automatic NATO assistance in the event of a new attack (even if Article 5 is formally in effect), countries bordering Russia have no choice but to strengthen their own military to a level capable of deterring an aggressor in the first weeks of a conflict. Calculations show that Europe has the necessary resources – the EU's combined GDP is almost 10 times larger than Russia's, and European military spending (\$457 billion in 2024) is several times greater than Russia's (Atlantic Council, 2025a). However, in the past, European states were slow to transform this power into real military force, relying on the “American shield.” Now the situation is changing: Europe is moving from a comfortable dependence to the understanding that further delay is dangerous.

Ukraine served A warning: only those guarantees are reliable that you can provide yourself. For medium-sized and small countries, this means focusing on internal consolidation, preparing society for possible trials, and building reserves for a rainy day. For Europe, this means maintaining unity and autonomizing defense to avoid the fate of Ukraine, which found itself outside the formal security system in 2014. And although European states still value their alliance with the United States, they are already shifting to a more independent approach. The era of strategic loneliness is a time when all states, even allies, have a “long cord of their own interests.” And in this time, those who are prepared to act based on the worst-case scenarios will survive and retain influence. Ukraine, with its heroic resistance, has proven that self-reliance can turn the tide even in extremely unfavorable conditions. Now Europe faces a similar challenge: will it be able to learn from the Ukrainian experience and ensure its own security without blindly relying on others? The answer to this question will largely determine the future of European security.

US President D. Trump and the new logic of transnationality: the erosion of the collective security system.

1. Donald Trump is gradually undermining the traditional architecture of US alliances, moving relations with partners into the realm of tough pragmatism.

Since returning to the White House, US President Donald Trump has consistently undermined the established system of alliances, shifting relations with partners to a pragmatic “fee for service” principle. This was most evident in trade. In April 2025, Trump imposed a basic 10% tariff on imports from all countries, justifying it by citing the need to “restore fairness” and protect American manufacturing. However, this measure was only the starting

point: just a few days later, the US administration announced a series of additional “retaliatory” tariffs, differentiated based on the trade balance of specific countries with the United States and their policies.

China has become the main target of the new tariff attack. Already, by March, the rate on Chinese goods was raised to 20%, and at the same time, 25% duties were introduced on steel and aluminum from all countries. As a result, the total load on Chinese exports to the USA reached 45–80% depending on the category of goods. However, on May 12, 2025, the sides agreed to a temporary de-escalation: the tariff on Chinese imports in the USA was reduced from 145% to 30%, and Beijing, in turn, reduced retaliatory tariffs from 125% to 10% for a period of 90 days (Reuters, 2025f).

Japan initially faced tariffs totaling 24–25% on automobiles and various industrial goods. However, on July 23, 2025, a compromise was reached: tariffs were reduced to 15%, and Tokyo, in return, opened its markets to American agricultural products and high-tech exports (Reuters, 2025i). For Japan, the agreement became a way to avoid the destruction of its automobile industry, while for the USA, it was a step-by-step move to expand access to the Japanese market.

Washington was particularly harsh with India and Brazil, the largest members of BRICS. (European Commission, 2025e). India received a retaliatory tariff of 26%, and on August 6, 2025, the rate was increased by another 25%, bringing the total to about 50%. The formal pretext was India’s purchases of Russian oil, which Trump called “undermining US interests.” India responded harshly to the US tariff threats, declaring that it would defend its economic interests no matter what (Reuters, 2025e). The White House also made overtures to Pakistan, which irritated India. In response, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi ignored four calls from Donald Trump (The Times of India, 2025) and planned a trip to China for the 25th summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), demonstratively building an alternative foreign policy vector. The SCO summit could become a marker of “Global South solidarity,” which has seen a rapprochement between India, Russia, and China (The Guardian, 2025). Ultimately, this could prove a more dire scenario for the United States than the classic “Kissinger nightmare” of a China-Russia alliance. Although differences between India and China have not been completely resolved, their shared assessment of Washington as an aggressive and unpredictable player is bringing their positions closer together.

This trend is also supported by Brazil, where President Lula da Silva is also opposing D. Trump’s policies. Brazil also came under attack from the US: since April, the rate was 10%, but on July 9, 2025, D. Trump raised the tariff to 50% on all Brazilian goods (Reuters, 2025h), citing a “witch hunt” against former President J. Bolsonaro, despite the fact that in 2024 the US trade balance showed a surplus of \$7.4 billion in Washington’s favor.

Donald Trump has also toughened his policies toward the United States’ closest neighbors, Canada and Mexico (The Guardian, 2025e). In August 2025, tariffs on Canadian goods not covered by the USMCA were increased from 25% to 35%. While more than 85% of trade between countries remains protected by the USMCA, strategic sectors such as steel, aluminum, and automobiles remain under attack. Prime Minister Mark Carney responded by announcing the cancellation of most retaliatory tariffs on American goods, retaining restrictions only on these sensitive sectors, to resume negotiations with Washington (Reuters, 2025 g). Amid economic pressure, Trump has also repeatedly made provocative statements about Canada becoming the “51st US state” – rhetoric perceived in Ottawa as an undermining of sovereignty and a symbolic marker of a new transactional policy (Eisen, 2025).

Regarding Mexico, the White House has repeatedly announced and suspended new tariffs on Mexican goods in the range of 25–30% (Reuters, 2025j), tying them to demands to strengthen the fight against illegal immigration and shut down fentanyl supply chains. At the same time, Donald Trump has actively revived the topic of building a border wall. with Mexico as a symbol of the fight against migration (Houston Chronicle, 2025).

US strategy is becoming increasingly pragmatic and conditional, even toward long-standing allies. Now even they are not immune to economic coercion if agreements no longer align with Washington's interests.

By the summer of 2025, relations between the United States and the European Union were in a state of increasing tension due to threats large-scale trading wars. The reason was repeated statements by the US President Donald Trump announced his intention to impose 30% import tariffs on a wide range of European goods, including automobiles, semiconductors, and pharmaceuticals, effective August 1, 2025. In response, the European Commission, led by Ursula von der Leyen, prepared mirror tariffs on €93 billion (\$109 billion) worth of American goods, along with a number of other retaliatory measures. On July 27, 2025, at a meeting in Turnberry, Scotland, US President Donald Trump and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen concluded a framework trade agreement imposing a 15% import tariff on most EU goods. In exchange, Europe pledged to invest \$600 billion in the US and an additional \$750 billion in the energy sector and defense industry by 2028 (European Commission, 2025e). Thus, the tariff standoff was mitigated by a large investment package, reflecting Trump's transactional style of policy.

Overall, this deal between the US and the EU reflects a new stage of pragmatism in transatlantic relations. It implies a shift away from the previous approach to liberal, almost automatic market openness between allies in favor of a flexible, situational trade policy in which economic decisions are subordinated to evolving strategic interests. Tariffs, investment commitments, and trade quotas are becoming part of political bargaining not only on economic issues but also on key issues of security, energy, technology, and industrial policy.

At the same time, D. Trump questioned NATO's principle of collective defense, stating that his commitment to Article 5 "depends on how you define it." (Associated Press, 2025 c). At NATO summits, D. Trump demanded that allies increase military spending to 4–5% of GDP (double the previous target).

All these steps send a signal to the allies: *The US will only honor its commitments if it serves its own interests.* Unsurprisingly, Europe's trust has been shaken amid Trump's phone calls with the Kremlin, the EU's top diplomat called this policy "*appeasement*" and expressed shock that Washington is effectively excluding Europe from decisions on Ukraine (Atlantic Council, 2025b). As a result, allies begin to prepare for the worst.

European leaders openly state that America under Trump "no longer wants to guarantee Europe's security," and key partners are seeking autonomous strategies. The EU also launched the Readiness 2030 program to strengthen its defense capabilities (Varma, 2025).

Trump's unpredictable, egocentric policies are destroying the previous system of collective security and pushing other countries to rely primarily on their own strength.

Europe faces the challenge of strategic independence.

1. European countries are forced to reconsider their defense doctrines: are they capable of ensuring security without relying on the United States?

European countries are forced to rethink the foundations of their defense strategy in the event of a weakening of the American “nuclear and military umbrella.” Although NATO members in Europe collectively spend approximately twice as much on defense as Russia, their capabilities remain incomparable to the might of the United States (Bartz & Kollmer, 2024). First, Europe’s level of spending has remained insufficient for many years: even by 2024, the average defense spending of EU countries was only about 1.3% of GDP (compared to 2.9% for the United States) (European Commission, 2025d), with the leading countries in the region – Germany, Italy, and Spain – holding between 1.1% and 1.5% of GDP. Secondly, the high cost of weapons and personnel effectively negates Europe’s nominal advantage over Russia: considering parity in military spending, Russia has a five-fold advantage over France and a six-fold advantage over Germany in terms of the so-called “military purchasing power” of budgets (Bartz & Kollmer, 2024). The technological gap also remains significant: the share of R&D in EU defense spending is extremely low – only 0.02% of GDP in 2023 versus 0.3% in the United States (European Commission, 2025d), while investment in new equipment has been declining for decades. In the event of a possible clash with a peer adversary, Europe will require a sharp increase in armaments and a significant increase in the size of its armed forces.

Without US support, Europeans would have to recruit an additional ~300,000 soldiers (~50 brigades) and spend €250 billion annually on top of their current budget – that is, increase their defense budget to ~3.5–4% of GDP (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2025a). It would take at least 1,400 new tanks and 2,000 infantry fighting vehicles – more than now there are in Germany, France, Italy, and Britain together – and an annual production of approximately 2,000 drones to deter Russia alone. Without the US nuclear umbrella and its global projection forces, Europe will face enormous defense risks. These figures highlight the harsh reality: the EU is currently incapable of independently guaranteeing its security in the face of equal military threats.

At the same time, Europe already has legal instruments for developing its own defense. In fact, The mutual defence clause is enshrined in Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (European Union, 2012), which states that in the event of an armed attack on a Member State, other EU Member States are obliged to provide assistance and support to it with all the means at their disposal, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

But the legal framework needs to be complemented by the political willingness of EU countries to act together, as well as military-industrial coordination, so that the new programmes cease to be a set of disparate initiatives and become part of a common defence strategy.

EU countries must be prepared to make collective decisions on security, even if this sometimes entails limitations on national sovereignty. Military coordination – a shift from disparate national armies and equipment to integrated planning and joint operations. And finally, military-industrial integration: the launch of PESCO (European Union, 2025) (a mechanism for enhanced military cooperation in the EU, within the framework of which countries jointly develop weapons, standards and projects for the EU army), the European Defence Fund, the ASAP (Accelerated Ammunition Production Action Plan) and EDIRPA (Common Arms Procurement) regulations create the basis for the consolidation of the military market (European Commission, 2025 b). These are precisely the factors that could transform European “strategic autonomy” from a slogan into a practical instrument.

2. Ukraine serves as a test of Europe's ability to act as an independent political entity.

The war in Ukraine has become a test of Europe's ability to act as a unified, independent player. On the one hand, the EU has demonstrated unprecedented resolve: for the first time in history, it financed lethal weapons supplies to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility, accepted millions of refugees, and imposed 17 sanctions packages against the aggressor (European Commission, 2025a). However, the most important share of *military* assistance at critical moments still came from Washington. The Americans supplied Kyiv with high-precision weapons (HIMARS, Patriot, JDAM, etc.), intelligence, and financial support, without which Ukraine would not have survived. European capitals, however, often hesitated: for example, Germany required pressure from its allies and a US promise to provide its Abrams tanks before it sent Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine (Atlantic Council, 2025b). In the first six months of Trump's presidency (2025), the US made no new public commitments to Kyiv at all, and Europe was forced to urgently seek solutions (Associated Press, 2025c) – even purely European forces were discussed to ensure future peace in Ukraine (Atlantic Council, 2025b). But the reality is that any such EU missions would still depend on “*vital US support*” – from American air power to logistics. Within NATO, Europeans also cannot yet do without the US: the American contribution accounts for approximately 70% of the alliance's total military expenditures and a disproportionately large portion of its combat capabilities. The European Union has passed the test of unity in diplomacy and economic pressure, but *not in strategic autonomy*. Without the US, European countries would not dare to act as decisively and effectively. Ukraine has highlighted Europe's dependence on the US in matters of major war – from intelligence and weapons to nuclear deterrence – thereby confirming that full strategic sovereignty for Europe remains elusive.

3. Internal contradictions, economic dependence on the United States and a shortage of defense resources make strategic autonomy an elusive goal.

Internal contradictions and dependence as obstacles to autonomy. The concept of Europe's “strategic autonomy” faces not only resource constraints but also political disagreements. There is no unified position: within the EU, a split remains between “Atlanticists” and “autonomists.” The former – the Eastern European allies, the Baltic states, and the Netherlands – believe that European security should continue to be based on NATO and US military support. The latter – primarily France, and to some extent also Italy and Spain – advocate for a more independent approach (Varma, 2025). This fundamental dilemma is the primary guarantor of security: Washington or “Europe itself” – is also giving rise to debates about the institutional forms in which defense autonomy should be built. Even proponents of increased military power differ in their views: some associate it with the framework of the European Union, while others prefer flexible coalitions of states outside the rigid structures of the EU (Varma, 2025).

An additional rift is financial: the EU's eastern members (Poland and the Baltic states) are demanding a sharp increase in defense spending and joint EU loans to support this, while the northern and some western members (Germany and the Netherlands) are traditionally cautious, unwilling to decouple their budgets or allow Eurobonds for military purposes. Economic dependence on the United States also constrains Europe. The EU's military-industrial complex is fragmented: Europe operates over 170 different types of weapons (the United States operates around 30) (European Commission, 2025d), dozens of national manufacturers operate for narrow domestic markets. As a result, the EU is forced to purchase key equipment overseas, losing technology and money. From 2015 to 2024, the volume of arms imports by European NATO members doubled, with the

US share of suppliers rising from 52% to 64% (European Commission, 2025d). Europe is almost entirely dependent on the United States for critical systems – missile defense, strategic carriers, modern drones, and nuclear weapons. The same applies to the broader economy: the United States remains the EU’s primary external market, investor, and technological leader (from cloud services to microchips), making it difficult to pursue an independent course. As a result, European “strategic autonomy” as of 2025 is more a declaration than a reality. Internal disagreements prevent the development of a unified strategy, economic and technological dependence undermines independence in practice, and a lack of defense capacity does not guarantee Europe’s security without an alliance with the United States. Therefore, full autonomy currently appears utopian – at least until these limitations are overcome.

Global strategic loneliness as a new norm of existence.

1. The traditional system of alliances and collective defense of the 20th century is gradually eroding: even formal alliances do not guarantee support in the event of a crisis. States are forced to assume that they will have to rely primarily on their own resources. This increases the emphasis on the development of armed forces, technological independence, and the creation of flexible, situational alliances.

In the 21st century, the alliance and collective security system established in the 20th century is eroding. Even formally established alliances no longer provide automatic support in a crisis. National interests are taking center stage: if alliance commitments conflict with the current priorities of a major power, they are often ignored or revised. A typical example is US policy under President Donald Trump, when Washington made it clear that assistance to allies is not unconditional (The Guardian, 2018). Under these conditions, traditional military blocks are gradually losing relevance and are increasingly being replaced by flexible cooperation formats (Ashford, 2023), such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) or the AUKUS trilateral partnership. In other words, long-term multilateral alliances are giving way to ad hoc coalitions united by specific interests.

Every country is forced to rely only on itself. In the new strategic reality, states assume that in a crisis, they may be left alone to face the threat. Expecting automatic assistance from allies no longer seems reliable. Ukraine’s experience has demonstrated the limits of external security guarantees: neither the Budapest Memorandum signed in 1994 nor subsequent promises of integration into NATO and the EU protected Ukraine from military aggression.

Kyiv received military support, but it was limited by the national interests of its allies and fears of escalation, and direct armed intervention by NATO countries did not occur.

A similar situation is observed in other alliances: for example, the Collective Security Treaty Organization is formally obligated to protect its members, but in 2020, when Armenia (a CSTO member) was embroiled in war in Nagorno-Karabakh, its allies refused to fight on its side. Moscow stated that the fighting “was not taking place on Armenian territory,” and therefore the CSTO guarantees were not involved (Stronski, 2024). As a result, Armenia was effectively left alone against a more powerful adversary, undermining trust in the alliance. Such examples are a signal to all medium-sized and small countries: at a crucial moment, they cannot rely on automatic external assistance and must rely primarily on their own strengths and resources.

This “strategic loneliness” is leading to increased demand for national armed forces and defense technologies. Countries around the world are increasing their military budgets and capabilities, preparing to become self-reliant.

Record military budgets: Global military spending reached \$2.7 trillion in 2024 (SIPRI, 2025), reflecting a surge in national defense investments. Many European countries sharply increased their defense budgets following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, recognizing the need (Axios, 2023) self-defense. Germany has created a special €100 billion fund to rearm the Bundeswehr; Poland is increasing military spending to 4-5% of GDP; Japan plans to double its defense budget by 2027. Even countries that have long relied on allies (for example, South Korea under the US “nuclear umbrella”) are now considering strengthening their own offensive capabilities and, in some cases, discussing the possibility of acquiring independent deterrents. The arms race is taking on the characteristics of a new reality: each state seeks to secure itself independently, potentially increasing overall instability and the risk of conflict.

At the same time, the push for technological independence is strengthening. Recognizing that access to foreign technologies may be limited in a critical situation, countries are investing in developing their own technological and industrial sovereignty. For example, the European Union has begun talking about “technological sovereignty” and the accelerated development of critical industries (microelectronics, AI, cybersecurity) within its borders. This is partly a response to the declining reliability of the transatlantic partnership: European experts call the unpredictable US policies toward NATO and Ukraine a “wake-up call for Europe,” spurring a desire for military and economic autonomy (Business Insider, 2025). A surge in European investment in high-tech defense and dual-use technologies is already underway, from AI startups to domestic satellite constellations. Similar processes are underway in China, India, and other major powers: they are seeking to reduce their dependence on external suppliers by developing their own semiconductors, weapons systems, and communications infrastructure. The world is increasingly fragmenting into technological blocs, each relying primarily on its own innovations and resources.

Finally, rigid blocks are being replaced by flexible situational unions.

States are increasingly forming coalitions of “interest” to address specific challenges, avoiding long-term, onerous commitments. In the Indo-Pacific region, a network of partnerships is emerging in place of a formal bloc: the AUKUS alliance (Australia, the UK, and the US) on undersea technologies, the Quad dialogue (USA, Japan, India, and Australia) on Asian security, and others. These alliances are built on immediate mutual benefit and shared threat, without a legally binding “Article 5” (Ashford, 2023). Coalitions are also emerging in Europe. For example, the Ramstein coordination format for military assistance to Ukraine, the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) under the auspices of the UK, initiatives of Eastern European countries on joint air defense, etc.

Southeast Asian states are strengthening defense cooperation beyond the framework of existing treaties. Such alliances are more flexible and pragmatic: their members clearly understand that they are joining forces under specific conditions and can revise the agreements as soon as the situation changes.

At the same time, the number of bilateral agreements within the North Atlantic Alliance is increasing, reflecting both countries’ adaptation to the war in Ukraine and growing uncertainty about NATO’s ability to quickly and effectively defend a specific country in the event of direct aggression. The perceived threat creates a need to respond quickly, reducing the time required for multi-party approvals – bilateral agreements allow for faster decision-making.

Germany and Great Britain signed a Treaty of Friendship and Bilateral Cooperation on July 17, 2025 (UK Government, 2025), which covers a wide range of areas, including defense cooperation, joint technological and industrial projects, and coordination of efforts in the area of strategic deterrence. Previously, on October 23, 2024, London and Berlin concluded a defense agreement aimed at deepening military cooperation and increasing the interoperability of their armed forces (Deutsche Welle, 2025).

Germany has already received security guarantees from two European nuclear powers simultaneously, significantly strengthening its strategic resilience. The UK, in turn, has cemented strong bilateral ties with both Berlin and Paris, going beyond the traditional frameworks of NATO and the European Union. Back in 2019, France and Germany concluded the Treaty of Aachen (Europe's Security Increasingly). Lies Beyond NATO and the EU (2025), which provides for mutual support in the event of armed aggression and enhanced coordination in defense policy. France and the United Kingdom, in turn, rely on long-term partnerships, including the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties (The Lancaster House Treaties: 10 years of Franco-British defense) Partnership (2020), and in 2025, they announced new areas of cooperation – from joint planning for the use of nuclear forces to the creation of a separate coalition headquarters in Paris to support Ukraine. As a result, this trio – Berlin, Paris, and London – becomes a center of gravity for other states in the region, forming a network of broader coalitions around them, thereby cementing the trend toward the emergence of “alliances within the Alliance.” Thus, by the summer of 2025, a distinctive “leadership triangle” – Germany, France, and the United Kingdom – had finally emerged in Europe, and through a system of bilateral agreements, they began to form the core of a new security architecture.

A separate set of agreements emerged in Northern Europe. On December 18, 2023, Finland signed the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States, which entered into force on September 1, 2024 (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2025). The United States concluded similar bilateral agreements with Sweden and Denmark in late 2023 and early 2024 (Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 2023). These agreements grant the US military the right to use national infrastructure, store defense materials, conduct exercises, and conduct operational troop movements. They strengthened the direct American military presence in the region and became a logical extension of Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO.

In the Baltic countries, a similar trend was manifested through the signing in December 2023 of five-year roadmaps for defense cooperation with the United States, valid until 2028 (US Department of Defense, 2023). These agreements concern the rotational presence of American troops, interoperability of armed forces, and infrastructure development. At the same time, Lithuania signed an agreement to host a German brigade, which is accompanied by the construction of a new base in Rudnikai, financed by the European Investment Bank (European Investment Bank, 2025).

In general, bilateral formats are increasingly perceived as Insurance against potential delays or political disagreements within NATO itself. Doubts about the effectiveness of the Alliance's security provision intensified after the incident of September 10, 2025, when Russian drones violated Polish airspace (The Guardian, 2025d). Such incidents are becoming a factor in the additional mobilization of countries on NATO's eastern borders. Thus, Poland has begun an accelerated strengthening of its national defense. Similar measures are being prepared in the Baltic states, where “drones over Poland” and the Zapad-2025 exercises in Belarus are causing particular concern (Deutsche Welle, 2025a).

Taken together, all these trends mean that world politics has entered an era A world of global strategic loneliness, where each country must have a plan for independent action. Formal alliances and international norms still exist, but their reliability is no longer guaranteed. In a critical situation, a state can rely primarily on its own armed forces, economic stability, and the temporary support of individual partners, the latter being determined by their selfish interests, not by grandiose declarations of “eternal friendship.” For strong powers, this situation opens up new opportunities – they are freer to pursue an independent course, relying on their nuclear arsenal, military, and technology, without regard for allies. However, for small and medium-sized countries, the new reality poses serious risks: uncertainty increases, vulnerability to aggressors grows, and new security guarantees must be vigorously sought – from building up defense to diversifying foreign policy ties. A world of strategic loneliness dictates one principle for all states: when relying on allies, rely on yourself. Such realism is becoming a key factor in international relations today.

Conclusions. Possible risks and consequences.

1. Growing strategic loneliness increases the likelihood of a new arms race and general instability, as each state seeks to act primarily out of self-preservation. According to SIPRI (2025), global military spending increased by 9.4% in one year, reaching \$2.7 trillion, the most significant jump in more than three decades. Moreover, defense budget growth was recorded in all regions of the world. The United States, China, and Russia remain the largest spenders, accounting for approximately 60% of global spending. Europe also saw unprecedented growth: the continent’s total defense spending increased by 17%, reaching \$693 billion.

This widespread militarization is fueled by the logic of “self-preservation”: each state increases its armaments in response to perceived threats. This gives rise to the classic “security trap” – a “dilemma” arises when the US, China, and other powers build up their military capabilities in response to each other’s actions. A similar situation is possible in Europe: if the US weakens security guarantees, European countries will automatically begin accelerated rearmament to prevent possible Russian aggression (RAND Corporation, 2025). As a result, the “arms race” increases instability – the risk of miscalculation and escalation increases, with increased security for some posing a threat to others.

2. The transactional policy of the United States, combined with the absence of a strong autonomous Europe, creates a strategic vacuum that other powers can exploit.

In a context where US President Donald Trump is basing his foreign policy on national egoism, China is offering a vision of the future based on “justice and equality.” SCO Summit in Tianjin (August 31 – September 1, 2025) (State Council of the PRC, 2025) confirmed the trend of rapprochement between Moscow, Beijing and New Delhi against the backdrop of growing confrontation with Washington. Beijing took full advantage of the summit to bolster its image as a country striving for global leadership and building a new world order, while US President Donald Trump and other observers could see the forum as a signal of the formation of an anti-Western bloc. The ideological dimension was strengthened by Chinese President Xi Jinping’s presentation of his “Global Governance Initiative.” China already acknowledges the existence of a global governance system (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021) and proposes its reform, while maintaining the UN-centric general model (Embassy of the PRC in Ukraine, 2025).

Overall, China is actively exploiting the emerging influence gap and vacuum of international cooperation, expanding its economic and political reach in Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

For example, the Western Balkans have already become “a key logistical and economic gateway for China to the EU” within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (Re-Engaging Europe, 2023). Chinese capital is financing strategic infrastructure projects (transport, energy, mining) through loans from state banks, giving it significant leverage over the political elites of these countries. China is investing in the construction of a high-speed railway from Belgrade to Budapest, which will be integrated with the port of Piraeus (managed by the Chinese company COSCO), effectively turning Hungary into a “bridge” for Chinese goods into Europe (Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), 2024).

Russia seeks to establish control over the post-Soviet space, primarily through a combination of economic and political-humanitarian pressure. The Kremlin relies on military bases in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, its alliance with Belarus, and the mechanisms of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Deutsche Welle, 2024), which cement economic dependence on their neighbors. Energy leverage is also actively used – gas and electricity supplies to Armenia, Moldova, and the countries of Central Asia. Humanitarian instruments also play an important role: support for Russian-language media, educational programs, and cultural projects that create a favorable information environment for Moscow. Regarding Ukraine, all these methods have already given way to outright military aggression.

Against this backdrop, Turkey is expanding its influence in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. In the Western Balkans, Ankara is relying on soft power: the TIKA agency funds cultural, educational, and religious projects in Muslim-majority regions, reviving historical ties and strengthening trust in local leaders (Re-Engaging Europe, 2023). In the Caucasus, Turkey has formed a strategic “triple alliance” with Azerbaijan and Georgia (Caspian Alpine, 2024), relying on joint energy routes and transport corridors, etc. Similar examples can be cited for other countries in the region: Saudi Arabia is investing in countries in Africa and the Middle East, while Iran is using political and military instruments in neighboring zones of influence.

Thus, the weakening of Western coordination has created a vacuum that other actors are filling to advance their own interests.

3. For Ukraine, this means building a comprehensive security architecture, where NATO and the EU are only one element, and the key condition will be its own resilience and the ability to find ad hoc alliances. The country needs to develop its economy and maintain a sufficient level of sovereignty to avoid being drawn into geopolitical confrontation, while simultaneously maintaining dialogue and reaching agreements with two or more competing blocs. In other words, Ukraine must be strong enough to minimize external pressure and independently balance its own interests.

In particular, Ukraine needs to develop strong armed forces and a defense industry, rely on internal solidarity among elites and society, form stable regional alliances with neighbors, and use flexible coalitions based on the ad hoc principle (“for this case”) and strengthen technological and economic autonomy.

Only such a strategy will minimize vulnerability in a context where international alliances offer less and less guarantee of protection. Thus, one can note the recently created EU-Ukraine Joint Working Group on Defence Industrial Cooperation, which aims to integrate Ukrainian defence enterprises into the European defence technology base (European Commission, 2025c). In parallel, within the framework of the Build with Ukraine” production lines are being launched for the manufacture of Ukrainian weapons - UAVs, guided missiles, artillery systems - directly on the territory of allied countries (The Cipher Brief, 2024). This not only allows for the provision of our own troops but also increases the strategic autonomy of our partners: they gain

access to proven technologies and can diversify their sources of arms supplies. Technological exchange is also becoming important: European companies are mastering Ukrainian military developments, and Ukraine is adopting the know-how of European manufacturers, which overall strengthens the defense capabilities of the entire region.

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