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TRUMP'S STATE VISIT TO BEIJING AND THE NEW COLD WAR ON ASIA

By Tings Chak

From Beijing this week, the first US state visit to China in nine years is being staged for the world to see. The Great Hall of the People is open to Donald Trump, who has traveled with eighteen US executives—Apple, Tesla, BlackRock, Boeing, and Nvidia among them. A state banquet on Thursday, followed by tea and lunch on Friday.

On the streets of Beijing, 'the Beast' has been securing the motorcade route since last week, flown in by C-17 ahead of Trump's arrival to meet with Chinese president Xi Jinping. The international mainstream press is calling this a thaw between Washington and Beijing. Trump's actions seem to speak otherwise.

Encountering a Different China

The last US state visit to Chinese soil was Trump's own, in November 2017—at the start of the US-imposed trade war that would deepen under Biden and intensify in his second presidency. The China that received him then was still learning to respond to the aggressions. The China that receives him now has spent nine years diversifying its export markets, building supply chain autonomy, developing the technological leverage to push back, while turning towards Global South countries. Trump's failed tariff war against China ended up hurting its own economy and people more than China's, and Beijing's export controls on rare earth elements ultimately forced Trump to back down. The eighteen US executives in the delegation, including Tim Cook, Elon Musk and Nvidia's Jensen Huang, have come because their companies cannot do without the Chinese market. The economic instruments of US containment have not produced the result Washington wanted.

The War on Iran

Since 28 February, the illegal US-Israeli war on Iran—which postponed this summit by six weeks—has killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and thousands of Iranian civilians. Meanwhile, more than 2,700 civilians have been killed in Lebanon, where US-Israeli strikes continue.

In retaliation against the US-Israeli aggression, Iranian missiles and drones have struck fifteen US military sites across Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—Al Udeid Air Base alone hit by 44 missiles and 8 drones, with 217 structures damaged or destroyed and an estimated \$5 billion in repair costs. In its eleventh week, despite the US naval blockade and bombings, Iran has mounted sustained resistance and the war has not gone as

Washington predicted. It has made unmistakable what anti-war movements across our region have long argued: the bases sold to host nations are not shields but targets.

In the days immediately before his arrival, Trump rejected Tehran's peace proposal as 'garbage'. On 11 May—the eve of his departure—the US Treasury sanctioned twelve more individuals and companies over Iran-China oil trade, and the same day, a group of US senators urged Trump to approve a new \$14 billion arms package for Taiwan.

Beijing has not been silent. On 2 May, in answer to an earlier round of US sanctions on five Chinese refineries, China invoked its anti-sanctions Blocking Rules for the first time since their introduction in 2021: the US measures "shall not be recognized, enforced, or complied with" within Chinese territory. The Chinese Foreign Ministry called them illegal and unilateral, without basis in international law. Though the defiance was not unconditional—Chinese banks have been quietly advised to limit exposure to the sanctioned refiners—the public position is clear. In the same week, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi received Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araghchi in Beijing. China remains Iran's largest trading partner and the principal buyer of its oil.

An Architecture of Containment

Iran is not the only war backdrop. Across the region, the architecture of US military presence is being expanded and accelerated. The same week of Trump's visit, the largest joint military exercises in Philippine history concluded—Balikatan 2026, with seventeen thousand foreign troops from seven nations, Japanese anti-ship missiles positioned on Filipino soil, and a new US fuel depot in the south of the country. In central Luzon, the Philippines has granted 4,000 acres in New Clark City to the Pax Silica Initiative—a US-controlled high-tech zone operating under US common law and granted diplomatic immunity, on a lease renewable for 99 years.

On 28 April, the commander of US Forces in Korea, General Xavier Brunson, told the Japan Times that Washington is building a 'kill web'—a networked system fusing Korea, Japan and the Philippines into a single architecture against China, Russia and North Korea. In August 2025, Trump told reporters of the US base at Pyeongtaek that he would like to "get ownership of the land where we have a massive military base" in South Korea, a country where the US has 66 military bases.

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Amid Trump-Xi Meeting, US Coalition Urges Congress to ‘Prioritize Peace’ and End ‘Confrontational Posture’ With China

“Americans are increasingly supportive of US-China cooperation, while tensions with China do not serve American interests,” said dozens of anti-war groups as President Trump met with Chinese President Xi.

By Stephen Prager

As US President Donald Trump meets with Chinese President Xi Jinping, a coalition of anti-war groups is calling on Congress to pressure the administration to “prioritize peace, cooperation, and stability” at a time when the US-China relationship is increasingly hostile.

“Americans are increasingly supportive of US-China cooperation, while tensions with China do not serve American interests,” argued the coalition, which includes Just Foreign Policy, Win Without War, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, Our Revolution, and dozens of other groups in a letter sent to members of Congress on Thursday.

They cited recent surveys showing that negative perceptions of China are consistently falling among Americans, including a Pew Research poll from January, which showed that just 28% of Americans viewed China as an “enemy” compared with 42% who saw it that way in 2024.

“At a time when so many domestic needs are going unmet, a confrontational posture toward China is costing untold billions of dollars in military build-up, trade and energy disruption, and securitization of technology—money that could and should be spent on the things Americans need at home,” the coalition continued.

Trump’s first visit to China in nearly a decade comes amid a global energy crisis caused by his war in Iran, a conflict where China has expressed a desire to act as a mediator.

While the coalition denounced Trump’s war as “an unauthorized war of choice” that has led the world to a “deeply dangerous and uncertain place,” it also said it presented an opportunity for the US and China to engage in diplomacy in hopes of putting the relationship “on a more stable footing.”

Xi said that Taiwan remains the “most important issue in China-US relations” as the talks kicked off, warning that if mishandled, it could create a “very dangerous situation.”

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said after a meeting on Thursday that the decades-old “One China Policy,” which takes no explicit view on Taiwan’s sovereignty, hasn’t changed. Though he warned that it would be

“a terrible mistake” for China to attempt to seize the island by force.

Friction between the US and China has only been heightened after Trump announced the sale of more than \$11 billion worth of weapons to Taiwan in December, the largest ever arms sale to the island. At the time, China said the sale “gravely violates” the One China Policy.

The anti-war coalition warned that “current military and political trends in the United States, China, and Taiwan are moving us closer to a serious crisis or conflict over the island” and called on the US to “revitalize its One China Policy and press Beijing to reaffirm its focus on peaceful unification, with no timeline.”

“Diplomacy with Beijing, rather than military posturing or arms racing across the Taiwan Strait,” they said, “is the only realistic path forward, especially since the American public has little interest in participating in a military conflict against China in defense of Taiwan.”

According to a survey by the Institute for Global Affairs in November, just 35% of Americans said they’d support the US sending troops to defend Taiwan if it were to be attacked by China. In a January poll commissioned by The New Republic, just 10% of Democratic voters said they wanted their party to support sending troops, and 30% wanted it to support sending weapons. But Democratic leadership has pressured Trump to take the opposite approach and ramp up hostility toward Beijing in advance of this week’s talks.

On Wednesday, Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY), the ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, was joined by Reps. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.), Jim Himes (D-Ct.), and Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.) to send a letter urging Trump to approve a delayed \$14 billion arms sale to Taiwan ahead of his visit.

The Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee joined in support for the sale, saying that “Trump must reaffirm in his meeting with Xi that the US will continue to uphold our longstanding One-China policy while standing firmly with Taiwan’s democracy and security. And he must make that clear by notifying Congress of the \$14

billion arms sales to Taiwan. Anything else would undermine American credibility.”

Just Foreign Policy (JFP) countered that the request to send more weapons just before talks were set to begin was “deeply unserious” and an “absurdly ill-timed move that would sabotage diplomacy—or worse.”

Jake Werner, the director of the East Asia program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft—another signatory to the anti-war letter—warned that while Democrats should confront Trump on the issue of China, they shouldn’t goad him into an even more hawkish approach.

“If you want to attack Trump, that’s great, but you should attack Trump on the basis of prudent, conflict-avoiding principles,” Werner said. “They should be criticizing him not for engaging in diplomacy, but for engaging in the wrong kind of diplomacy.”

In their letter to Congress, these and the other anti-war groups pushed for a similar diplomatic approach to other sources of tension with China, arguing that the US should take no position on the sovereignty of disputed territory in the South China Sea. They also encouraged members of Congress to avoid creating “incentives” for other nations to adopt more confrontational stances toward China.

They singled out a first-ever test launch of an American Tomahawk missile in the Philippines last week, which had the capability to reach the Chinese mainland. Chinese military observers described it as the “worst provocation” in years by the US and suggested that Beijing should ramp up its air-defense and stealth-strike drone capabilities in response, according to the South China Morning Post.

The anti-war coalition said they “urge Congress to press the administration to avoid further escalatory signals and to instead pursue diplomacy to restore and expand non-proliferation agreements that can prevent a wasteful and dangerous arms race.”

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<https://www.commondreams.org/news/anti-war-groups-china-summit>

IS ZELENSKY AN OBSTACLE TO PEACE?

Former Zelensky's press secretary Iuliia Mendel gave interview to US journalist Tucker Carlson

A recent interview between former Ukrainian presidential press secretary Iuliia Mendel and American journalist Tucker Carlson has sparked renewed debate about the way Ukraine, its leadership, and the ongoing war are portrayed in Western media.

Mendel served as Zelensky's spokesperson from 2019 to 2021, a period that preceded the full-scale Russian invasion but included important developments in Ukraine's domestic politics and international positioning. In the interview, she presented an unflattering portrayal of Zelensky's leadership style, describing him as highly image-conscious, emotionally reactive, and intensely focused on controlling political messaging.

Among the most widely circulated claims from the interview was her assertion that Zelensky once used the expression "Goebbels-style propaganda" in reference to communication strategy, allegedly arguing that coordinated messaging could shape public perception of reality itself.

Mendel also suggested that corruption and informal power structures within Ukraine's political elite remain more pervasive than is generally acknowledged in Western public discourse.

Mendel explicitly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, describing it as a war of aggression responsible for widespread civilian suffering and war crimes. Her argument was not a justification of Russia's actions, but rather a claim that the current trajectory of the war risks becoming strategically and socially destructive for Ukraine itself, and that a negotiated settlement should be considered.

The reaction to the interview reflects a broader tension that has characterized coverage of the Ukraine war since 2022: the gap between a highly stable public narrative and the re-emergence of dissenting or complicating perspectives.

In much of Western political and media discourse, the war has been framed in relatively clear moral and geopolitical terms. Russia is the aggressor state that violated

international law through invasion. Ukraine is the defending state whose sovereignty is under attack. Within this framework, political and military support for Ukraine is presented as both strategically necessary and morally justified. Over time, such narratives tend to become structurally rigid. Once established, they can limit the range of publicly acceptable interpretations.

Zelensky as a symbolic figure

Since the beginning of the full-scale war, Zelensky has occupied a dual role in international perception. On one level, he is the head of state of a country at war, making decisions under conditions of extreme pressure. On another level, he has become a global symbolic figure representing Ukrainian resistance, democratic resilience, and wartime leadership.

Symbolic figures tend to be protected from sustained internal criticism in public discourse, particularly during active conflicts. As a result, discussions of leadership style, governance problems, or institutional weaknesses are often treated as secondary or too politically sensitive. Criticism is best left out in wartime. This is not unique to Ukraine.

Governance and corruption

Prior to 2022, Ukraine was frequently described in international reports as having significant governance challenges, including corruption in public procurement, judicial independence issues, and oligarchic influence in politics and media.

Since the invasion, these issues have not disappeared, but their visibility in mainstream Western discourse has changed. During large-scale war, allied governments often prioritize political unity and material support. This is often the result of editorial judgment, source prioritization, and the perceived strategic consequences of certain types of reporting during wartime.

Nevertheless, the effect can be a narrowing of public perception. Structural problems

remain, but they are discussed less frequently or framed in more cautious terms.

Polarization and dissent

One of the most immediate reactions to Mendel's interview was the accusation that her statements constitute "Russian propaganda." This reflects a broader pattern in contemporary wartime discourse, where categorization often replaces analysis.

It is true that Russian state media and affiliated networks actively circulate disinformation about the war. However, the label of propaganda is also frequently applied to any narrative that deviates from the dominant framework of interpretation, regardless of its origin or evidentiary status. This creates a binary interpretive environment: information is either aligned with the accepted narrative or dismissed as hostile manipulation. The risk of such a system is that it reduces analytical precision. Not all critical accounts are equally reliable, but not all critical accounts are equally fabricated either. Mendel's position complicates this binary logic. She condemns Russia's invasion while simultaneously criticizing aspects of Ukrainian leadership and governance. This combination does not fit neatly into existing informational categories, which contributes to the intensity of the reaction. Once a coherent framing is established, deviations from it are often treated as treason rather than contributions to informed discussion.

Russia's invasion remains the initiating act of the war and the primary driver of its destruction. But understanding the internal dynamics of Ukraine requires moving beyond simplified symbolic narratives and engaging with the political complexity that persists even under conditions of extreme external threat. The Ukrainian leadership, shaped by wartime incentives and external backing, may have structural reasons to resist negotiation even when parts of society or parts of the international system drift toward the idea of a settlement.

Robots on the Front Line

How The Ukraine War Is Changing Ground Warfare

For much of the war in Ukraine, attention has focused on what happens in the air. Small quadcopters hovering above trenches, FPV drones diving into armored vehicles, reconnaissance systems mapping every movement along the front. The war has often looked less like traditional combat and more like a continuous aerial surveillance network punctuated by sudden explosions. But something less visible is now becoming just as important: machines on the ground. Unmanned ground vehicles — small robotic platforms moving across mud, rubble, and shell-cratered fields — are increasingly being used to transport supplies, evacuate wounded soldiers, and in some cases carry weapons or explosives directly toward enemy positions. They are not replacing soldiers. But they are beginning to take over some of the most dangerous and predictable tasks of frontline warfare.

What is emerging is not a single “super-weapon,” but a system: drones above, robots below, and humans somewhere behind both.

The basic idea behind this shift is relatively simple. Aerial drones see. Ground robots act. A reconnaissance drone identifies a position — a trench, a building, a fortified basement. That information is passed to a ground unit, sometimes via a network of operators and sometimes through semi-automated systems. A robotic vehicle then moves toward the target area carrying supplies, ammunition, or explosives.

In theory, this allows for more precise operations with less direct exposure of soldiers. In practice, it is still messy, experimental, and highly dependent on terrain, weather, and electronic warfare conditions.

But even in its imperfect form, the logic is clear: reduce human exposure in the most dangerous zones by replacing predictable movements with machines.

Why the ground matters again

For years, modern warfare appeared to be moving away from the ground. Airpower, satellites, and long-range precision strikes seemed to dominate. The Ukraine war reinforced that trend in many ways, especially through the widespread use of small drones.

Yet the ground never stopped mattering. In fact, it has become more dangerous precisely because it is so visible. A battlefield saturated with drones is a battlefield where movement is constantly detected. Vehicles

are tracked quickly. Infantry is exposed. Logistics convoys are vulnerable almost immediately after they move.

This creates a paradox: the more transparent the battlefield becomes, the more risky human presence on the ground becomes.

That is where unmanned ground systems come in. Unlike aerial drones, they can carry heavier loads — ammunition crates, medical equipment, sometimes even large explosives. Some systems are capable of transporting dozens or even hundreds of kilograms across relatively short distances. But they are slow, often fragile, and far less flexible than aerial systems. Vegetation, mud, and broken terrain can easily limit their effectiveness. Communication links can be disrupted. Cameras can be blocked or blinded. In other words, they are not a replacement for anything. They are a workaround.

The logic of combining systems

What makes these systems more relevant now is not their individual capability, but how they are used together. Aerial drones provide awareness and targeting. Ground robots provide payload and proximity. Human operators coordinate and decide.

A typical sequence in some reported operations looks like this: a drone spots a target area; coordinates are relayed; a ground robot is sent forward carrying either supplies or explosives; and a strike is executed with reduced human exposure at the front line.

This combination is still relatively new and varies widely between units and manufacturers. Some systems are improvised in workshops close to the front. Others are more formalized prototypes developed by defense companies under wartime conditions.

The weight of logistics

One of the less dramatic but more important roles of ground robots is logistics.

Moving ammunition, food, water, and medical supplies to frontline positions has always been dangerous. In a drone-saturated environment, it has become even more so. Traditional supply routes are easily observed and targeted.

Robotic platforms can reduce that risk, at least partially. They can move supplies forward without directly exposing drivers or infantry. They can also retrieve wounded soldiers from areas where evacuation would

otherwise be extremely risky. This is not glamorous technology. It is slow, often unreliable, and still limited in scale. But logistics tends to decide wars more often than battlefield innovations do.

Despite growing attention, ground robotics in Ukraine remains in an early and uneven stage of development. These systems are heavily affected by electronic warfare. Signal jamming can disrupt control links. Terrain can immobilize them. Vegetation can obscure sensors. Night operations are difficult without strong imaging systems. Even simple mechanical failures can end a mission.

There is also the question of cost versus loss. While cheaper than armored vehicles, these robots are still not disposable in the strict sense. Losing them repeatedly adds up quickly, especially in sustained operations. As a result, most deployments still rely on human backup. Robots are sent where risk is high, but rarely without contingency plans involving soldiers.

Both sides are watching closely

Despite their limitations, unmanned ground systems are being closely observed by military planners well beyond Ukraine.

Armies have been trying to reduce exposure of soldiers for centuries — through armor, artillery, airpower, precision weapons, and now robotics. What is different today is the speed of iteration and the low cost of experimentation under wartime conditions. Ukraine, in particular, has become a place where new systems are tested rapidly. But there is no guarantee that this pace will translate into stable, long-term doctrine. Many systems will likely prove too fragile, too expensive, or too situational to scale broadly.

It is tempting to describe ground robots as a revolution in warfare. That language is common whenever new military technology appears. But the reality is usually more gradual and less clean.

Tanks did not replace infantry. Aircraft did not eliminate ground warfare. Drones have not removed the need for soldiers. Ground robots are unlikely to do so either.

It is important not to overstate the autonomy of machines in Ukraine’s war. The conflict remains fundamentally human in its decision-making, its strategy, and its political objectives. Robots do not choose targets. Drones do not decide campaigns.

The battlefield is not becoming unmanned. It is becoming layered.

This Week in History: May 16–May 31

On 16 May 1966, the **Cultural Revolution** was formally launched in China under Mao Zedong, unleashing a decade of ideological excesses, and social upheaval.

On 17 May 1990, the World Health Organization removed **homosexuality** from its list of mental illnesses.

On 18 May 1974, India carried out its first nuclear test, “**Smiling Buddha**,” becoming a nuclear power.

On 19 May 1991, **Croatia voted overwhelmingly for independence** from Yugoslavia, accelerating the collapse of the Yugoslav federation.

On 22 May 1990, **North and South Yemen unified** to form the modern Republic of Yemen.

On 23 May 1949, the **Federal Republic of Germany** — West Germany — was officially founded.

On 24 May 1993, **Eritrea** formally achieved independence from Ethiopia after a long and devastating war.

On 25 May 1977, **Star Wars** premiered in the United States.

On 26 May 1972, the United States and the Soviet Union signed the **SALT I agreement** in Moscow, symbolizing the era of détente and attempts to stabilize the nuclear balance during the Cold War.

On 27 May 1994, after the end of apartheid, **Nelson Mandela** presented South Africa’s first multiracial government.

On 28 May 1987, a young West German pilot, **Mathias Rust**, landed a small aircraft near Red Square in Moscow.

On 29 May 1953, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first climbers confirmed to have reached the summit of **Mount Everest**.

On 30 May 1967, the Nigerian region of **Biafra** declared independence, triggering a civil war.

On 31 May 2010, Israeli commandos intercepted the Gaza-bound aid **flotilla Mavi Marmara**, killing several activists and provoking a major international crisis around the blockade of Gaza..

Trump’s State Visit to Beijing and the New Cold War on Asia

By Tings Chak

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In Japan, military spending is being doubled—the largest rearmament since 1945—with 400 US Tomahawk missiles purchased, a project that has continued and accelerated under right-wing Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. For Taiwan, Trump authorized \$11 billion in arms in December, the largest package in history, and has told the press he intends to discuss arms sales—with Xi himself.

From Hyperimperialism to Hands off Asia

What is on display in Beijing this week is not a thaw, and the executives traveling with Trump are not a sign of moderation. The economic and military aggression against China are two halves of the same project of containment. This is hyperimperialism: an empire turning increasingly to force as its economic dominance erodes, with China and other Global South countries defending their sovereignty as the primary targets. Trump’s transactional style is not a departure from US imperialism but the form it takes when its economic instruments no longer deliver.

The Hands Off Asia campaign, launched on 30 April—the anniversary of the liberation of Vietnam—by the International People’s Assembly and partner organizations across our region, calls for the removal of foreign military bases from Asia, the cancellation of aggressive pacts like AUKUS and the Quad, and the redirection of military spending towards the needs of our peoples. The architecture being expanded across our region was not built to protect the people but to encircle China and discipline the rest of Asia. As Trump arrives in Beijing this week, no deal signed at the Great Hall will hide what his administration is building across our region—and the peoples of those places, from Okinawa to Subic, from Pyeongtaek to Tehran, see this war-mongering for what it is and oppose it, calling for: Hands off Asia.

Tings Chak is the Asia co-coordinator of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and co-editor of Wenhua Zongheng: A Journal of Contemporary Chinese Thought. She is based in Beijing.

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Latvian Government Collapses After Drone Incidents Trigger Political Crisis

Latvian Prime Minister Evika Siliņa resigns as coalition fractures over airspace violations and defence failures, exposing growing instability amid spillover effects from the war in Ukraine.

The Latvian government collapsed this week after a political crisis triggered by a series of drone incidents linked to the war in Ukraine, exposing growing tensions inside NATO states over the unintended spillover of the conflict.

Prime Minister Evika Siliņa resigned after her coalition lost its parliamentary majority following a dispute over responsibility for recent airspace violations and a drone crash that damaged infrastructure in eastern Latvia. The incident, involving unmanned aerial vehicles believed to have been Ukrainian, sparked accusations that the government had failed to adequately protect national airspace and respond to escalating security risks along the border with Russia. The immediate political rupture began when the defence minister was dismissed over what the prime minister described as operational failures in air defence coordination. Coalition partners reacted sharply, arguing that the government had

mishandled both the incident itself and its political fallout. Within days, one of the key governing parties withdrew support, effectively collapsing the administration.

At the centre of the crisis are a series of drone flights across Baltic airspace linked to Ukraine's ongoing long-range operations against Russian targets. According to officials, some of these drones may have been diverted by electronic warfare systems or technical malfunction, causing them to stray into NATO territory. Others have suggested that AI-guided drones may have autonomously decided to strike targets within Latvia, once diverted from the original path.

While no casualties were reported in Latvia, the incidents raised concerns about the adequacy of air defence systems in a region increasingly exposed to hybrid and indirect forms of warfare.

The political consequences in Riga reflect a broader pattern emerging along NATO's

eastern flank. As the war in Ukraine continues, neighbouring states have faced a rising number of airspace violations, drone crashes, and electronic interference incidents. Even when material damage is limited, the political pressure on governments has intensified, particularly when responsibility is difficult to assign clearly between Russian disruption and Ukrainian operational spillover.

The Latvian collapse highlights a structural problem: modern warfare increasingly produces cross-border effects that fall into a grey zone between war and peace. Governments are held accountable domestically for incidents that originate in a conflict they are not directly part of, but from which they cannot fully insulate themselves.

Latvia now faces the task of forming a new government in an environment of heightened security anxiety, political fragmentation, and continued uncertainty.

EU rejects Putin proposal to involve Schröder in Russia talks

The EU has firmly rejected Moscow's proposal to involve former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder in Ukraine talks, as Brussels insists negotiations must remain unified and free from politically compromised intermediaries.

Diplomacy with Russia was until recently a taboo. The US and Russia resumed talks last year, when Trump came back to the White House. Europe and Russia, instead, have not talked since 2022. The European Union has rejected a Russian proposal to include former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder in any future negotiations with Moscow. EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas warned against allowing Russia to influence the choice of European representatives in potential peace talks.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had suggested Schröder could act as a mediator in possible discussions over Ukraine and broader European security arrangements. The proposal was quickly dismissed in Brussels and Berlin.

Schröder had long-standing ties to Russian state energy firms and maintained a personal relationship with Putin even after

the full-scale invasion of 2022. Critics argue that he could not be considered a neutral actor in any diplomatic process.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said it is up to Europe to decide who would represent it in possible negotiations with Moscow.

The rejection reflects a broader EU position that any negotiations with Russia must be conducted under unified European conditions and without figures perceived as politically compromised. Critics warned that the Russian proposal appeared designed to exploit internal European divisions rather than advance genuine peace talks.

The controversy comes amid renewed debate over future negotiations as the war in Ukraine continues and international diplomatic efforts remain stalled.

Ukrainian officials strongly opposed Schröder's involvement, stressing that any mediator must be acceptable to all parties.

Angela Merkel's name emerged too in German political circles. However, neither Ukraine nor supporters of Ukraine expressed enthusiasm for this candidature. In the past Ukrainian President had directly accused former German Chancellor Merkel for refusing Ukraine NATO membership in 2008 and implicitly allowing Russian aggression.

While some political voices in Europe have cautiously suggested exploring possible channels for dialogue with Russia, the dominant position in Brussels remains that credibility and unity are essential preconditions for any future negotiations. "The EU should not humiliate itself by seeking direct talks with Russia", said Kaja Kallas only a few weeks ago. For now, EU leaders have closed the door on Moscow's proposal, underscoring the continuing political isolation of Russia as EU policy.

CAN FRANCE LEAD?

As American commitment becomes less predictable, Paris is positioning itself as Europe's strategic pivot—without the means to fully assume Washington's role.

The idea has moved from diplomatic salons in Paris to the mainstream of European strategic debate with unusual speed: Europe may have to prepare for a future in which the United States is still formally present in NATO, but no longer functions as its unquestioned military backbone. In that context, France is increasingly presented not as an alternative to Washington, but as the only plausible European state capable of holding together a more autonomous security architecture.

This is not a sudden French ambition. It is the continuation of a long intellectual tradition in French strategic thinking, one that has always been uneasy with full dependence on American guarantees. What has changed is not Paris, but the strategic environment: the war in Ukraine, the return of large-scale conventional conflict to Europe, and the political volatility of US commitments under different administrations have all combined to turn old French instincts into what now looks like a European planning problem.

Even without a formal US withdrawal, even without a dramatic rupture in NATO, incremental changes in American posture would already force a redesign of European defence. A smaller permanent US presence, reduced willingness to lead early crisis escalation, or a more transactional approach to alliance obligations would leave Europeans with a gap that cannot be filled overnight. It is in this gap that the French argument acquires weight.

France presents itself as the only EU member with the strategic vocabulary and institutional memory to operate at continental scale. It is the Union's sole nuclear power, one of the few European states that still maintains a globally deployable military, and a country whose defence planning still rests on the assumption that war is not an abstract contingency but a political reality that must be prepared for in advance. In Paris, the language of "strategic autonomy" is not new branding but inherited doctrine, shaped by historical episodes such as the Suez crisis, when French and British forces were forced to retreat under American pressure. That moment left a deep imprint: alliances are necessary, but dependence is dangerous.

Yet the gap between political ambition and material capability remains stark. France can define frameworks, propose doctrines, and initiate coalitions, but it cannot replicate the structural depth of American power in

Europe. The United States does not only provide troops. It provides an entire system of warfighting: intelligence fusion, satellite reconnaissance, strategic airlift, missile defence integration, and logistical sustainment over time and distance. Europe, even collectively, remains unevenly equipped in these areas. France is no exception, despite its relative strength.

This structural imbalance becomes most visible when discussing Ukraine. The war has become a practical stress test for European claims of autonomy. European governments have already provided substantial financial support to Ukraine, in some categories exceeding American contributions. But the decisive difference lies elsewhere: in the types of weapons systems, the speed of delivery, and the depth of industrial capacity behind them. Where Europe struggles most is not in political will or aggregate spending, but in replacing high-end US enablers such as long-range precision strike systems and advanced integrated air defence at scale.

In that sense, the debate about France leading a more autonomous European NATO is not primarily about money or troop numbers. It is about whether Europe can generate a coherent military system at all. The French argument implicitly acknowledges this: Paris does not claim to replace the United States, only to organise Europe in such a way that the absence of American primacy does not immediately translate into strategic paralysis.

The nuclear dimension reinforces both France's centrality and its limits. President Emmanuel Macron has recently pushed for a broader European reflection on the role of French deterrence in continental security. The logic is clear: in a world where American guarantees appear less automatic, Europe's only independent nuclear capability becomes more politically relevant. Yet France has not offered anything resembling a shared nuclear command structure. The arsenal remains entirely national, the decision to use it remains exclusively in Paris, and there is no indication of any shift towards a NATO-style nuclear sharing model. What is evolving is not control, but signalling: a willingness to extend the psychological reach of French deterrence to European partners without diluting sovereignty over it.

At the same time, Europe's broader defence-industrial limitations remain unresolved. The collapse of flagship projects

such as the Franco-German Future Combat Air System illustrates how difficult it is to translate political rhetoric about European sovereignty into functioning joint programmes. Diverging operational requirements, industrial competition, and uneven strategic priorities continue to fragment even the most ambitious initiatives. Germany's growing reliance on American platforms, particularly in air power, further complicates the picture.

All of this means that the idea of a "French-led NATO in Europe" is less a blueprint than a tension. It captures a real shift in expectations about US reliability, but it does not resolve the underlying structural dependencies. Europe may want to think in terms of autonomy, but it continues to operate within an architecture that is still fundamentally transatlantic.

There is also a political uncertainty that no strategic document can eliminate. France itself is not stable in its current strategic direction. The consensus around Macron's vision of Europeanised deterrence and greater strategic autonomy is contested domestically. The rise of political forces sceptical of military engagement abroad and critical of NATO integration introduces a degree of volatility into what is often presented as a long-term French state project. In that sense, Europe is not only asking whether France can lead a more autonomous NATO-like structure, but whether France will maintain the same strategic orientation after its next electoral cycle.

For now, France remains indispensable without being sufficient. It is the only European power capable of initiating a serious discussion about post-American security structures, but it cannot by itself provide the material foundation for them. A European security system with less America will not be a French version of NATO. It would be, at best, a more fragmented, more fragile, and more improvisational arrangement, held together by partial capabilities, shifting coalitions, and the continuing, if diminished, presence of the United States.

The real question, therefore, is not whether Paris can replace Washington. The question is whether France can organise Europe enough to prevent the gap between American retrenchment and European readiness from becoming a structural vulnerability. At present, the answer is uncertain.

What Went Wrong with the Donbass

From “Attractive Showcase” to “Voracious Monster”: The Troubled Reality of Donbass

The Donbass has, for more than a decade, been shaped by war, displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and the gradual reconfiguration of political and administrative life under extraordinary conditions. What began as a regional conflict within Ukraine evolved into a prolonged territorial and institutional break, leaving behind not only physical devastation but also a deeply fragmented social and economic landscape. After a contested referendum in September 2022, the region became officially — at least from the Russian perspective — part of Russia. The question of integration into Russia became not simply a matter of political alignment, but a long and complex process of rebuilding governance structures, restoring basic services, and redefining everyday life for the population. The Russian news agency *Antifascist* published an interview with two key figures from the Donbass, the authors behind the Telegram channel “Russkiy mir - Ukraina” (“Russian World - Ukraine”).

Aleksey Georgievich Alexandrov is described as a long-standing participant in the anti-nationalist movement in Ukraine. Over the years, he held senior positions in the party “Russian Bloc” and the Russian Movement of Ukraine, later serving as deputy head of the apparatus of the People’s Council of the unrecognised Donetsk People’s Republic. He is also identified as one of the organizers of the 11 May referendum in Donetsk, which took place in 2014.

Aleksey Alekseevich Alexandrov, the second interviewee, was formerly head of the Kiev city youth organization of the Russian Bloc and the Russian Movement of Ukraine, and later head of the Secretariat of the DPR People’s Council.

Both Alexandrov brothers were also involved earlier in the creation of the first anti-“Orange” protest tent camp in Kiev in 2005, at the time of the pro-Western Orange revolution, which they opposed. In addition, they participated in the initiative group behind the movement for the customs union with Russia, which in the autumn–winter of 2013–2014 evolved into what they describe as the political framework of the Donbass uprising.

April 2014 was the moment of irreversible rupture for the Donbass, when “millions of people went out into the squares with flags,” refusing to accept the post-Maidan political order. In their account, residents of Donbass “took responsibility for their cities, created militia units, and proclaimed a Republic,” entering a process whose costs and duration were impossible to foresee at the time.

More than a decade later, the situation is described as deeply problematic. The war has intensified and alongside it brought about accumulated “colossal social challenges, infrastructure problems, and psychological exhaustion from years of confrontation.”

Greats expectation and reality

Asked to compare expectations of the “Russian Spring” period with the actual outcome, the two brothers offer a stark assessment. They concede that “the main positive result today is the distancing of the region from Ukraine,” but immediately insist that “this is where the positives essentially end.”

In their view, the original vision of Donbass was significantly broader. It was meant to become, as they put it, “an attractive showcase, a magnet for people oriented toward Russia but still cut off from it.” What emerged is its opposite, they argue: “Instead of an attractive showcase — a voracious monster.”

They describe the current system as something that no longer produces attraction or replication, but rather rejection, which “repels compatriots, supporters and potential partners across the world,” since “no one in their right mind would want to turn their home into something like this.”

The disappointment, they insist, is not abstract. It is social and moral: people “were ready to endure many things, but for a better future for themselves and their children — not for the enrichment of a group of looters.”

The “strangling” of the Russian Spring

The Alexandrov brothers reject the idea that later outcomes were inevitable. Instead, they argue that the original political dynamic was deliberately redirected.

In their words, “the Russian Spring was strangled not only for geostrategic reasons, but in the interests of those who profited from the misfortunes of the Russian people.” They reinterpret the Minsk process not as diplomacy, but as structural containment:

“The Minsk agreements were not about territorial integrity or international law. They were about fear — the fear of the Russian elites before the approaching collapse of the 1991 consensus.”

This, they argue, led to what they call “political sterilization” of the region, in which “almost everything alive and capable of producing new meanings was removed.” When it later became clear that

reintegration into Ukraine was impossible, a shift toward what they see as chaotic administration took place: externally appointed managers “far from the subject, and therefore indifferent and often incompetent.”

The resulting structure is described in sharply negative terms. What emerged in the Donbass was not a functioning model of integration but a distorted administrative environment: “A ghetto, a grey zone for opaque schemes and budget distribution.”

The governance in the region is designed for control, not innovation. In the two Russkiy Mir authors’ formulation, “everything creative and thinking was removed in order to ensure full controllability.”

This produced a self-reinforcing administrative cycle in which loyalty is valued above competence, and where “the system reproduces itself in a fractal manner across all levels.”

Elites, war, and justification narratives

A recurring theme is the role of personnel selection and local elites. The interviewees argue that administrative structures were built on “demonstrative loyalty and knowledge of obedience,” while “thinking individuals are not needed — only faithful ones.” This, they suggest, creates fertile ground for corruption and informal power networks.

Although they acknowledge the reality of war, they insist that it cannot serve as a universal justification. “War is not only suffering,” they say, “it is also a stimulus to show our best qualities.” In their assessment, however, over the past decade “almost nothing has been done.” They describe the result as “catastrophic minimalism,” visible in symbolic or incomplete projects and in what they see as systemic mismanagement of reconstruction and social policy.

No project, no horizon

Beyond the regional case, the two brothers extend their critique to a broader political level. They argue that the core problem is the absence of a coherent national project. In their words, there is currently “no project, no image of the future, no place to call millions of people toward.”

Even fundamental political goals remain insufficiently articulated: “Even the goals of the special military operation were never clearly formulated!” Regardless, the Alexandrov brothers want to preserve hope: “We can still change the situation.”