

Opinion – Narrative without Strategy in the West’s Ukraine Position

Written by Aspasia Fatsiadou

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ASPASIA FATSIADOU, MAR 23 2025

The war in Ukraine, now in its third year, has from the beginning been framed as a moral confrontation — the dominant narrative being that of a sovereign democracy resisting the revisionism of an authoritarian Russian state seeking to reclaim the lost grandeur of its former empire. A crisis that might have been contained has turned into a prolonged war, with devastating consequences for Ukraine and corrosive effects on European cohesion. As the conflict drags on, what increasingly comes to light is a blend of ideological inertia, strategic deficit, and political avoidance — once again masked by emphatic declarations that only deepen the impasse.

The question was never whether Ukraine had the right to choose its alliances. The real issue was whether that right could be exercised, secured, and sustained without triggering a war that the West could neither enter directly nor bring to a decisive end. As early as 2022, Ukraine’s NATO accession was politically unfeasible — a fact acknowledged by Western leaders themselves. Yet the discourse of “freedom of choice” persisted, as though the invocation of rights alone could dictate political decisions, rather than a realistic assessment of the situation.

As Noam Chomsky rightly observed, great powers invoke a rules-based order while resorting to force wherever their interests demand it. The case of the Solomon Islands is indicative: in 2022, when this small Pacific state signed a security agreement with China, U.S. officials expressed concern over its strategic implications — a vocabulary never applied to Ukraine’s far more consequential efforts at integration.

Realist thinkers — from Mearsheimer and Walt to Morgenthau and Kissinger — had long warned that power ultimately determines state behavior. Yet the liberal hegemonic project, grounded in the belief that liberal democracy should expand globally and would be welcomed by all rational actors, came to dominate. The war was reduced to a binary framework of good versus evil, deliberately sidelining the complexities of history, geopolitics, and the balance of power.

Dissent was delegitimized, and diplomacy was pushed to the margins. Early opportunities — from pre-war negotiations to the Istanbul talks in the spring of 2022 — were set aside in favor of maximum pressure and the belief that Russia could be permanently weakened. A more flexible approach, including serious engagement with proposals for Ukrainian neutrality or conditional security guarantees, might have opened space for de-escalation. Instead, the war became a pattern of waiting, lacking a coherent plan — a conflict prolonged through narrative coherence rather than strategic design. But international politics is not a courtroom; it is a field of contestation, where principles must coexist with power and prudence. The idea that a war could be waged in Europe without strategic recalibration, de-escalation incentives, or serious engagement with the adversary constitutes a profound failure of diplomacy.

This critique does not absolve Russia. The invasion was a blatant violation of international law and an act of brutal force. However, European decisions were not based on a structured strategy grounded in actual conditions, nor were they adjusted as circumstances evolved — and that has been a critical weakness. European leaders assumed that structural constraints could be dismissed and that the political posture of the United States would remain unchanged. The widely acknowledged possibility of Trump’s return was treated as rhetorical speculation, not as a scenario that warranted planning. When that scenario materialized, Europe reacted with shock — not because Trump’s position

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was unknown, but because of its own strategic unpreparedness.

As 2025 unfolds, European leaders are recalibrating their approach — yet even these adjustments retain traces of illusion. With the United States no longer offering a blank check, the European landscape is becoming increasingly chaotic. Starmer's phrase "boots on the ground, planes in the air" may project determination, but neither Britain nor France possesses the capacity to shape developments on their own. The rhetorical confidence remains, but its geopolitical foundations are profoundly questionable. Europe aspires to play the lion — but it has no claws.

Even as peace becomes an undeniable imperative, Europe faces an unresolved dilemma. The perception of Russia as a permanent and existential threat to European security has now prevailed. Yet treating it as such across all domains risks cementing confrontation and distorting the architecture of post-war security.

At a deeper level, the war in Ukraine has become a mirror exposing Europe's internal contradictions. The continent struggles to articulate a coherent strategic response amid diverging national approaches: the anxieties of the Baltic states, the reluctance of the South, the Franco-British rivalry, and asymmetric economic interests. In this fragmented geopolitical environment, the formulation and endurance of a unified policy appear uncertain. Temporary collaborations — so-called "coalitions of the willing" — in the name of Ukraine's sovereign right to choose its allies are, by all accounts, an unlikely pathway to a viable solution. The presence of NATO forces on Ukrainian soil has consistently constituted a red line for Russia — and in view of developments on the battlefield, Moscow has no incentive to accept it.

At the same time, the potential expansion of this model into discussions about Europe's defense could trigger deeper rifts within the EU, especially if it involves the participation of Turkey — a scenario that would face staunch opposition from states like Greece and Cyprus, given the longstanding tensions with Ankara, which these states view as a direct strategic threat. This fragmentation is not merely institutional; it reflects a deeper failure of vision and coordination.

As Steve Witkoff recently stated, a necessary precondition for the end of the war is to define the ultimate objective clearly — to know where you want to go, so that you can shape the means to get there. One must also understand the aspirations of all parties involved, in order to reach a solution that everyone can live with. Yet this solution still feels distant. The question is how much destruction will precede it — and what new dangers may emerge if calm judgment and what goodwill remains do not prevail. For Europe, the real test lies not only in how the war ends, but in what kind of order emerges after it — and whether the lessons of this war can finally yield strategic maturity.

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geopolitical environment, the formulation and endurance of a unified policy appear uncertain. Temporary collaborations — so-called “coalitions of the willing” — in the name of Ukraine’s sovereign right to choose its allies are, by all accounts, an unlikely pathway to a viable solution. The presence of NATO forces on Ukrainian soil has consistently constituted a red line for Russia — and in view of developments on the battlefield, Moscow has no incentive to accept it. At the same time, the potential expansion of this model into discussions about Europe’s defense could trigger deeper rifts within the EU, especially if it involves the participation of Turkey — a scenario that would face staunch opposition from states like Greece and Cyprus, given the longstanding tensions with Ankara, which these states view as a direct strategic threat.

This fragmentation is not merely institutional; it reflects a deeper failure of vision and coordination. Peace will come, as all wars do, at the negotiating table. As Steve Witkoff [recently stated](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acvu2LBumGo&t=4215s), a necessary precondition is to define the ultimate objective clearly — to know where you want to go, so that you can shape the means to get there. One must also understand the aspirations of all parties involved, in order to reach a solution that everyone can live with. Yet this solution still feels distant. The question is how much destruction will precede it — and what new dangers may emerge if calm judgment and what goodwill remains do not prevail. For Europe, the real test lies not only in how the war ends, but in what kind of order emerges after it — and whether the lessons of this war can finally yield strategic maturity.

About the author:

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