

The European War in 2025

Escalation, Stalemate, or Armistice?

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A series of calamities clouded the very end of 2024. At a glance, they appear unrelated and coincidental. However, concluding thusly would be incorrect. Below is a list of those events, which took place during the Christmas holiday period in a timespan of just 72 hours.

- The Russian air defense, which was reacting to Ukrainian drone attacks against targets in the city of Grozny (Chechnya), [fallaciously hit](#) an Embraer 190 jetliner of Azerbaijan Airlines, prompting it to make a crash landing in Kazakhstan, with the loss of 38 lives of passengers and crewmembers onboard.
- The cargo vessel *Ursa Major*, operated by the Russian Ministry of Defense, [sunk](#) in the Western Mediterranean due to an internal explosion in the engine room, which Russian sources branded as a “terrorist attack,” without identifying the perpetrator but implicitly implicating Ukraine.
- The oil tanker *Eagle S*, which was shipping Russian oil under a flag of convenience, reportedly [damaged on purpose](#) the Estlink 2 seabed power cable between Estonia and Finland; consequently, Finnish law enforcement agents seized the vessel and diverted it to a port for further investigation.
- Another crude oil tanker, *Cordelia Moon*, believed to be a vessel in Russia’s extensive “[shadow fleet](#),” temporarily [blocked](#) the Bosphorus Strait after it suffered engine failure, thus disrupting shipping traffic in this vital maritime chokepoint.

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These catastrophes and accidents, which contrasted in causes and took place in different geographic locales separated by thousands of kilometers from each other, nonetheless have a congruity. All of them illustrate the indirect impact of the European War (a.k.a. the War in Ukraine), which will hit its third anniversary next month—without its end in sight.

Ukraine: Another Year of the Bungled War

The course of the war in 2024 was fairly monotonous. Throughout the year, the numerically superior Russian forces continued to maintain stubborn pressure on the different parts of the front, steadily gaining ground and pushing back westward the defending Ukrainian forces. Nonetheless, no strategic breakthrough has materialized. Yet, the Russian narrative did its best to magnify those gains domestically and externally, presenting a takeover of each ruined small town as a decisive triumph. Many Western media outlets willingly made stories by replicating such narratives and predicting the imminent collapse of Ukraine's defense. On paper, Russia's gains appear noteworthy; last year, its forces advanced [seven times more](#) than in 2023, taking control over some 4,000 sq. km of the Ukrainian territory. At first blush, this sounds impressive. However, in real terms, the total advances achieved by Russian forces in 2024 make up less than 10 percent of the territory of the Moscow oblast. To achieve this result, Russia has had to pay the heaviest price. Its estimated attrition rate in 2024 surpassed over [420,000 troops](#). In December 2024, the Russian daily losses peaked at around [2,000 soldiers](#).

Against that background, the Ukraine Defense Forces in 2024 were able to take control over parts of Russian territory in the Kursk region, increase drone and missile strikes against targets in Russia's strategic depth, and corner the Black Sea Fleet in its naval bases. Even so, Ukraine also sustains heavy losses in fighting, while its civilian population suffers from the large-scale attacks on the country's energy infrastructure and other targets (targeted with over [12,000 ballistic missiles and drones](#) in 2024).

Overall, the war is at a strategic impasse. That forms a bifurcation point: Russia (which is now self-persuaded of the near triumph) will either escalate the war or agree to negotiate something like an armistice or ceasefire—at least a temporary one. Regretfully, at the current stage, the room for optimism still appears too constricted.

Beyond Ukraine: Art of Bluff, Sub-Threshold Warfare, and Rogue Alignments

Russia portrays the war as an existential [confrontation with the West](#), where Ukraine is just a proxy and a battlefield. Therefore, the essential part of the Russian strategy rests on Western targeting opponents' political will. What amounts to nuclear blackmail is again

a core stratagem that operates with ambiguous statements, veiled warnings, declared “red lines,” and practical drills of the strategic triad’s components. To a certain extent, such an approach has proven to be effective vis-à-vis the Western antagonists, so far.

Furthermore, the last year featured two new precarious trends. The first is an intensification of Russian [hybrid operations](#) against Western actors, primarily European ones. Those operations represent a set of (mostly) non-kinetic, deniable actions below the level of an actual attack, the purpose of which is to target the political will of opponents in order to deter them from continuing to support Ukraine and accept Moscow’s strategic stipulations.

The second trend is the direct involvement of North Korea in the war: Pyongyang [deployed its elite troops](#) to Russia just one month after it signed with Russia a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in June 2024. Iran and Russia are reportedly going to sign something similar during the 17 January 2025 official visit of Iran’s president to Moscow. Meanwhile, a [Russia-bound weapons package](#), including ballistic missiles, is reportedly waiting to be shipped from an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea.

Quo Vadis in 2025?

Notwithstanding Moscow’s triumphant grandstanding, its ability to turn the war’s tide appears to be shrinking decisively. Here are some major trends that might gain momentum and increasingly come to affect Russia’s strategic posture in 2025.

- Russia’s “wartime” economy starts to experience more and more [problems](#), which makes the maintenance of domestic stability less certain in the short- and mid-term perspective.
- The [end of the gas transit](#) arrangement via Ukraine means Russia can export gas in a westerly direction via a network of pipelines it shares with Türkiye. This is reflected in the fact that Russia’s total share of *direct* natural gas exports to European markets dropped from 42 percent in 2021 to only 5 percent as of 1 January 2025.
- In parallel, the perspectives of the Russian oil and LNG exports become less assured due to the steadily snowballing effect of sanctions, increasing pressure on the Russia-operated “shadow fleet,” and a dearth of LNG carriers. Although Russian natural gas (unlike its oil and coal) remains unsanctioned by the West and EU imports of Russian LNG reached “[record levels](#)” in 2024, it does not change the overall trend too much.
- The need to recruit more manpower to the field army (without declaring a mobilization), the ensuing labor workforce shortage, and the domestic tensions produced by a labor migration generate an intricate trilemma for the Russian leadership.
- Declared “red lines” did not deter the West from assisting Ukraine and lifting caveats on the use of modern Western weapons against military targets inside Russian territory.

- Iran, one of Russia’s few practical allies, suffered several strategic setbacks in the Mid-Eastern War, which started in October 2023. These include, notably, the incapacitation of Hamas and Hezbollah (two of Tehran’s regional proxies), the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, and the virtual collapse of Iran’s “[Shiite Crescent](#)” grand strategy. This new reality is likely to increase domestic tensions already marred by an acute economic crisis, power cuts, social discontent, intra-elite rifts, and the shadow of the future transition of power in Tehran.
- The downfall of Assad delivered Russia a prestige blow and deprived it of its Mid-Eastern foothold (together with billions of dollars spent to support that regime); it also put at risk Russian “projects” on the African continent.
- Finally, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, tacitly long expected in Moscow’s leadership circles, does not certainly mean that America’s expected transactional foreign policy would result in a turn in Russia’s favor and wholly deprive the European pillar of the West of American defense and security guarantees through NATO.

None of the above trends (and others unmentioned here) should be understood as decreasing Russia’s willingness to continue the war until its “triumphant end” (note: Moscow’s notion of victory remains both vague and in flux, as does its notion of peace). The December 2024 statements by Dmitry Peskov, Press Secretary for the President of Russia, and Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s Foreign Minister, clearly indicate that Moscow [rejects](#) the idea of freezing the war, which is apparently at the core of the nebulous “peace plan” advocated by Team Trump.

Judging from the standpoint of its national interests as it itself understood them at the time, Russia lost this war at the moment its missiles first hit Kyiv in the early morning of 24 February 2022. Yet, paradoxically, there is no other way left for Russia except to endure and reiterate the same pattern over and over again in anticipation of a different outcome. Attacking Ukraine was a war of choice. As such, the Kremlin (theoretically) still can reassess its course and agree to negotiate a *reasonable* compromise whilst finding a way to claim a “triumph” for its domestic audience. Conceivably, the weeks and months following Trump’s 20 January 2025 inauguration will clear the fog of uncertainty—or, alternatively, it will make it even thicker. In the meantime, the progression of the war will remain triangulated between armistice, deadlock, and escalation scenarios. In the event of the materialization of the second or the third options, one should expect a recurrence of further disastrous incidents akin to those mentioned at the beginning of this paper.