

Year Four in Ukraine: NATO Views and Middle East Impact

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Brief Analysis

A senior NATO official joins U.S. and regional experts to discuss how the Trump administration's initial peacemaking forays might affect the war's broader geopolitical stakes, from great power competition in the Middle East to rare-earth minerals and Western counter-messaging.

On February 18, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Dana Stroul, Anna Borshchevskaya, Javier Colomina, and Riad Kahwaji. Stroul is the Institute's research director and Kassen Senior Fellow. Borshchevskaya is the Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow in the Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. Colomina is the NATO secretary-general's special representative for the southern neighborhood and deputy assistant secretary-general for political affairs and security policy. Kahwaji is a security and defense consultant based in Dubai and founder of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Dana Stroul

A new phase has opened in the U.S. approach to the Russia-Ukraine war. The past week of Trump administration actions constitutes the first high-level effort to broker an end to Russia's war of aggression and full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It also marks a shift from the policy approach of the Biden administration, which emphasized cooperation with allies and partners—especially in Europe—to isolate and impose costs on Russia for the invasion, while committing to hold no talks about the future of Ukraine without Ukraine at the table.

For the past three years, the governments of the Middle East have resisted completely aligning themselves with the U.S.-led coalition in support of Ukraine, instead maintaining ties to and cooperation with Russia. Now, with a new approach evident in Washington, there are important insights to be gleaned about how these governments will respond, as well as key questions about the region's future with respect to Russia, Ukraine, and a changing U.S. role.

Anna Borshchevskaya

Over the past three years, Vladimir Putin has leveraged Russia's war in Ukraine to challenge both the U.S.-led liberal world order established after World War II and the European security structures that have existed since the Cold War. He aims to create a polycentric world dominated by great powers acting with impunity in their spheres of influence. Throughout the conflict, it has become clear that many U.S. allies hold different priorities and have failed to grasp Moscow's broader objectives. This is not a war that Ukraine or the West can lose without great peril to all.

Putin has framed his country as a victim, arguing that the West is using Ukraine to weaken Russia. Countries in the Middle East have remained largely neutral, avoiding participation in Western sanctions and in many cases even expanding their commercial ties with Russia. This has undermined attempts to isolate Moscow on the global stage.

The persistence of competing narratives plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the conflict. Moscow has depicted its actions as a defensive response to attacks by the Western order, asserting that America and its partners have sought to punish Russia since the end of the Cold War. This narrative—which continues to gain ground in the Middle East—portrays Moscow as feeling threatened and coerced into aggressive actions. Yet such claims diverge from reality and have greatly exacerbated misconceptions and false interpretations in many parts of the world, including the Middle East.

For their part, Ukrainians understand that they need to engage better with the region and have worked toward that goal. Their message to the Middle East is simple: Russia's vision of a multipolar world is a losing one and will not bring prosperity.

Meanwhile, Moscow has strengthened its alliances with other authoritarian regimes, most notably Iran. The two countries signed a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership last month that will deepen their military and economic ties. Yet the fall of the Assad regime and Iran's diminished presence in Syria give the United States an opportunity to undermine the relationship and exploit Tehran's recent setbacks.

China plays a pivotal role in the Ukraine conflict as well. With Russia controlling Ukrainian territories rich in critical minerals, Beijing stands to benefit from these resources and already has implicit access to some of them. This issue has largely stayed in the background so far, but President Trump's attempts to leverage the acquisition of rare earth minerals and other materials in return for negotiating concessions will greatly affect both U.S. talks with Russia and strategic competition with China.

In short, the Ukraine war is a global struggle with far-reaching consequences, including for the Middle East, and the outcome of these negotiations will have a substantial impact on U.S. credibility worldwide. Lasting peace is impossible without Ukraine and Europe fully involved at the negotiating table. To demonstrate the strength of the liberal world order and prevent other authoritarian regimes from concluding that they, too, can act with impunity toward their neighbors, the United States must provide security guarantees to Ukraine and make Russia pay a heavy price for its aggression. Put another way, Ukraine needs to emerge from this war as the winner.

Javier Colomina

Global trends will remain crucial in shaping negotiations on Ukraine, with security intricately linked across various regions. This is evident in the presence of North Korean soldiers in Russia's Kursk region and the use of Iranian drones by Russian forces. Moreover, Ukraine has increasingly engaged with its southern neighbors, highlighted by the delegation that Kyiv sent to Syria following Bashar al-Assad's fall.

NATO likewise understands the importance of engaging with its south, which is where expanded outreach to the Middle East fits in. The emergent "axis of instability" is a growing concern for NATO, which views China as a key enabler of the Ukraine war. The alliance has expressed its disappointment with the role Beijing plays in aiding Russia. It is unacceptable for a nation that claims to uphold the UN Charter to remain silent in the face of such aggression.

How the war concludes will be critical for global security. If Russia perceives that it has achieved victory in the negotiations, Putin and other authoritarians in other regions will be emboldened. Currently, the Trump administration has adopted an approach of passing messages, assessing reactions, and adjusting its next steps based on those responses. Publicly, Washington has stated that no options are off the table. Yet future messaging on this conflict must clearly frame Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine as the victim. Privately, the administration has expressed support for NATO, with President Trump showing commitment to the alliance. To strengthen its stance, however, the administration should offer more public backing for NATO.

As officials seek a settlement to end the war, the question is not simply what is fair for Ukraine, but what is both fair and possible. The United States understands that the decision ultimately lies with Ukraine, yet the outcome of these negotiations will also have implications worldwide, sending a clear message about where Washington stands on global conflicts and authoritarian aggression. For now, the negotiations present a crucial opportunity to pressure Moscow and pave the way for peace in Ukraine. The quickest path to ending the war is for Russia to recognize that the conflict's global repercussions are harming its allies.

Riad Kahwaji

In the Middle East, a significant portion of public opinion has supported Russia on the war, largely due to perceptions that NATO's eastward expansion forced Moscow into conflict. Many regional governments also prioritize economic concerns, especially oil prices. This has led to a general posture of positive neutrality, with countries generally focused on engaging in negotiations and maintaining good relations with the great powers. Most recently, this neutrality has been evident in Saudi Arabia hosting preparatory peace talks—indeed, President Trump will likely embrace the idea of Riyadh and the United Arab Emirates mediating between Moscow and Kyiv, in part to create leverage for future Middle East deals in Gaza and elsewhere.

Similarly, the question of whether Ukraine will join NATO holds little significance for the Middle East. The region understands that Russia is unlikely to withdraw from large parts of Ukraine and views this outcome as the cost Kyiv must bear for aligning with the West. Yet the Middle East and North Africa are still significantly affected by the conflict—for example, Russian defense contracts with Algeria and Egypt were suspended after Moscow failed to meet its obligations, leading to losses for these countries.

Regarding recent events in Syria, Assad's fall has caused Russia to lose some of its credibility in the region. For example, a top official with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was highly critical of Russia's failure to keep Assad in power. In the future, Moscow will likely seek to balance its relations with Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, mindful of the GCC's control over oil prices and output. As a result, Russia will never fully align with Tehran's interests.

Finally, the manner in which the United States shapes narratives will influence future negotiations over crucial geopolitical issues in Ukraine and beyond. The Trump administration's recent comments about reclaiming the Panama Canal, buying Greenland, and assuming control over Gaza have raised questions about how such ideas may come across as imperialist and diminish Washington's credibility when it talks about liberal values. Like most other countries, the Middle East seeks peace and hopes that Ukraine will compromise to end the conflict, with strong international assurances of protection from future aggression.

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