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Securing Ukraine after the War: Nuclear Deterrence and Four Models of Security Guarantees

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A durable post-war security settlement for Ukraine will depend on the credibility of deterrence in an increasingly unstable European nuclear order. Russia's full-scale invasion has exposed the limits of conventional guarantees and demonstrated how nuclear coercion shapes both battlefield dynamics and Western responses. Ukraine's long-term security is therefore inseparable from the wider evolution of transatlantic and European deterrence frameworks. Ukraine's future security will unfold along one of four models: ad hoc guarantees led by nuclear powers; full integration into NATO; an EU-based framework centred on European deterrence; and neutrality. Each entails distinct trade-offs in credibility, escalation risk, institutional coherence and political feasibility. A sustainable settlement will ultimately depend on security guarantees that combine political resolve with credible military enforcement. In the absence of such assurances, post-war arrangements risk reproducing the same vulnerabilities that enabled Russian aggression in 2014 and 2022. The durability of peace will rest not on declaratory commitments, but on the capacity and willingness of Ukraine's partners to uphold them.

Securing a post-war Ukraine against a resurgent Russia presents a profound strategic dilemma. Ukraine is a non-nuclear weapon state facing a revisionist power with a massive nuclear arsenal. Any security pact must therefore balance credible deterrence against Russian aggression with reassuring Ukraine and ensuring long-term stability. Conventional measures alone have proven inadequate in the current war.

After relinquishing the Soviet nuclear weapons stationed on its territory in the 1990s, Ukraine also neglected the development of credible conventional forces. Although this situation began to change following Russia's first invasion in 2014, Ukraine's conventional forces remained inadequate to deter the second, larger-scale aggression launched by Russia in 2022.[1] Western threats of economic sanctions likewise failed to dissuade Moscow from attacking.[2] By contrast,

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[1] Sanders, Deborah, "Ukraine's Third Wave of Military Reform 2016–2022: Building a Military Able to Defend Ukraine against the Russian Invasion", in *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2023), p. 312-328, https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2023.2201017.

[2] Stein, Janice, "Escalation Management in Ukraine: Assessing the U.S. Response to Russia's Manipulation of Risk", in *The Kissinger Center Papers*, August 2023, https://kissinger.sais.jhu.edu/?p=467.

Russia's nuclear signalling played a significant role in shaping Western responses to the conflict

Russia's nuclear signalling appears to have played a significant role in shaping Western responses to the conflict.[3] While it is impossible to establish how NATO would have responded had Russia lacked nuclear weapons, the Alliance's willingness to use force against non-nuclear states, as demonstrated in Serbia in 1999, suggests that Moscow's nuclear arsenal has shaped Western risk calculations.[4]

Beyond reducing the likelihood of direct NATO military intervention, Moscow's nuclear threats contributed to limit the scope and pace of early Western military assistance to Ukraine during the early stages of the war.[5] As such aid was delivered incrementally to test the boundaries of Russia's perceived 'red lines',[6] mainly due to Vladimir Putin's repeated deployment of nuclear signalling.[7] Russia's war against Ukraine is not merely conventional, it has also become a nuclear crisis by design.[8]

At the same time, the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime is eroding. This trend is reflected in the collapse of key arms control agreements, notably the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty – which both the United States and Russia disavowed, and New START, which expired in 2026.[9] It is also evident in the weakening of normative commitments and the growing strain on verification mechanisms.[10] In parallel, rapid technological developments and increasingly assertive nuclear doctrines have further undermined existing constraints.[11] Together, these dynamics have reduced the limits on great-power nuclear competition. Thus, any post-war security arrangement for Ukraine must account for a European order where nuclear deterrence remains central.

In this security environment, NATO's nuclear posture continues to play an important role. Since Lisbon's 2009 NATO Strategic Concept until now, the Alliance has explicitly declared that "as long as nuclear

3 Baev, Pavel K., "Nuclear Brinkmanship in Putin's War: Upping the Ante", in *Brookings Commentaries*, 14 May 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/?p=1770795.
4 Stein, Janice, "Escalation Management in Ukraine", cit.
5 Sinovets, Polina and Muhammed Ali Alkış, "Deterrence, Compellence, or Credibility Fatigue? Russian Nuclear Threats in the War on Ukraine", in *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2025), p. 393-408, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2025.2586386.
6 Ibid.
7 Sinovets, Polina, "At the Brink: How Moscow's 'Dirty Bomb' Disinformation Campaign Risked a NATO-Russia War in October 2022", in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 2026, https://thebulletin.org/?p=129678.
8 Budjeryn, Mariana, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Its Impact on the Global Nuclear Order", in *Belfer Center Presentations*, 17 April 2024, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/russias-invasion-ukraine-and-its-impact-global-nuclear-order.
9 Vicente, Adérito, "The Future of the Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament Regime", in Adérito Vicente et al. (eds), *Russia's War on Ukraine. The Implications for the Global Nuclear Order*, Springer, Cham, 2023, p. 153-169.
10 Ibid.
11 Vicente, Adérito, "What the Two-Peer Nuclear Challenge Means for NATO and European Security", in *The Loop* (ECPR blog), 22 September 2025, https://theloop.ecpr.eu/?p=24395.

Under the second Trump Administration the United States is less predictable in its relations with European allies

weapons exist, [we] will remain a nuclear Alliance".[12] The United States provides the core of that deterrent, forward-based B-61 nuclear gravity bombs and strategic forces, while the United Kingdom maintains its Trident submarine deterrent aligned under the NATO umbrella, and France keeps an independent *force de dissuasion*.[13] However, under the second Trump Administration the United States is less predictable and more transactional in its relations with European allies as it increasingly pivots strategic attention towards Latin America and the Middle East.[14] Simultaneously, Washington is confronting a growing two-peer nuclear challenge posed by both China, which has been increasing its nuclear arsenal at sustained pace, and Russia.[15] These conditions have led Europeans, particularly in Paris and London, to rethink their collective security and defence. Recent Franco-British initiatives, such as the 2025 Northwood Declaration, emphasise closer coordination between the United Kingdom and France without undermining NATO.[16] Both allies agreed there is "no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations," explicitly anchoring their deterrents in the European dimension.[17] Furthermore, on 2 March 2026 French President Emmanuel Macron advanced the concept of forward deterrence or *dissuasion avancée*.[18] This new expansion of French nuclear deterrence is directed at European allies most exposed to Russian pressure and already embedded in NATO nuclear arrangements.[19] France would reinforce and partially project its nuclear capabilities across allied European territory through cooperation, deployments and joint exercises.[20] At the same time, it

[12] NATO, *NATO's Nuclear Deterrence Policy and Forces*, updated 20 May 2026, https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/natos-nuclear-deterrence-policy-and-forces.
[13] Ibid.
[14] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf; US Department of War, National Defense Strategy 2026, 23 January 2026, https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF.
[15] Creedon, Madelyn R. (ed.), *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, Alexandria, IDA Systems and Analyses Center, October 2023, https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/a/am/americas-strategic-posture.
[16] UK and France, *Northwood Declaration (UK-France Joint Nuclear Cooperation Announcement)*, 10 July 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement.
[17] Ibid.
[18] French Presidency, *Speech by the President of the Republic on France's Nuclear Deterrence*, 2 March 2026, https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2026/03/02/visit-to-the-ile-longue-operational-base.
[19] Roos, Grégoire, "Macron's Nuclear Weapons Offer to Europe: Gaullist Policy, Updated for a More Unstable World", in *Chatham House Expert Comments*, 4 March 2026, https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/38130.
[20] Fayet, Héloïse and Darya Dolzikova, "Macron Offers a Promising Vision for Nuclear Deterrence in Europe", in *RUSI Commentaries*, 11 March 2026, https://www.rusi.org/

UK and France now signal a stronger European pillar to complement US extended deterrence

would maintain exclusive national control over nuclear use decisions while contributing to the strengthening of European and NATO collective security.[21]

These two initiatives are quite important because the UK nuclear deterrent has traditionally been aligned to US-led NATO, whereas France has historically pursued an independent path.[22] But both now signal a stronger European pillar to complement US extended deterrence.

By contrast, Ukraine has no indigenous nuclear deterrent. It gave up the world's third-largest arsenal in 1994 under the Budapest Memorandum, receiving only security assurances.[23] These commitments were deliberately structured as non-binding security assurances in order to avoid establishing a formal obligation to defend Ukraine through the use of military force. Nevertheless, the Budapest Memorandum has provided an important political and normative basis for subsequent British and American support to Ukraine following Russia's violations of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.[24]

Public opinion has shifted dramatically: polls in late 2024 showed 73 per cent of Ukrainians favouring acquisition of nuclear weapons, up from 30 per cent in 1994.[25] President Volodymyr Zelensky's witticism, "Ukraine in NATO or nuclear weapons", encapsulates the debate.[26] Yet Ukraine remains bound by the Non-Proliferation Treaty and its 1994 commitments.[27] Reversing course would carry severe diplomatic and strategic risks such as the loss of Western support, sanctions and providing Russia with a "justification" for harsher measures.[28]

explore-our-research/publications/commentary/macron-offers-promising-vision-nuclear-deterrence-europe.

21 Rosenstein, Jonathan and Emily Cheesman, "What Macron's Changes to French Nuclear Policy Mean for European Security", in *Atlantic Council Dispatches*, 4 March 2026, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=909939; France and Germany, *Joint Declaration of President Macron and Chancellor Merz*, 2 March 2026, https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2026/03/02/joint-declaration-of-president-macron-and-chancellor-merz.

22 Chevreuil, Astrid and Jonathan Burchell, "Northwood Declaration: The Future of European Deterrence?", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 27 February 2026, https://www.csis.org/node/120991.

23 Kimball, Daryl G., "Ukraine, Nuclear Weapons, and Security Assurances at a Glance", in *ACA's Factsheets*, March 2022, https://www.armscontrol.org/node/6188.

24 Ibid.

25 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), *Attitude towards Ukraine's Restoration of Nuclear Weapons*, 23 December 2024, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1461.

26 Ostiller, Nate, "Zelensky Says He Told Trump that Either Ukraine Will Join NATO or Pursue Nuclear Weapons", in *The Kyiv Independent*, 17 October 2024, https://kyivindependent.com/zelensky-says-he-told-trump-that-either-ukraine-will-join-nato-or-pursue-nuclear-weapons.

27 Ukraine, Russia, UK and USA, *Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, Budapest, 5 December 1994, https://doi.org/10.18356/9789214030966.

28 Sinovets, Polina and Adérito Vicente, "How to Deter Russia: More Nuclear May Be

Technically, as suggested by a 2024 report commissioned by Ukraine's National Institute for Strategic Studies, a government research centre acting as an advisory body to the president and the National Security Council, Ukraine might be able to build nuclear warheads in a relative short timeframe.[29] But any nascent arsenal would be small, vulnerable to Russian pre-emption and lack a credible second-strike capability.[30] In sum, Ukraine's acute predicament as a country facing an existential threat, unprotected by nuclear arms and outside NATO, means that extended deterrence (either US, UK, or French-provided) will be highly desirable in any viable security model.

In part, this depends on the uncertainty surrounding a possible enshrining of neutrality in Ukraine's military posture. The exact terms of such neutrality are poorly defined: what guarantees would be given, and by whom? Without nuclear weapons or NATO membership, Ukraine would remain vulnerable to coercion and therefore may be pushed towards pursuing a national nuclear deterrent. No surprise that support for the nuclear option appears to be growing.[31]

Despite repeated Russian nuclear threats, Ukraine has neither been deterred nor intimidated

It is true that Russia's war against Ukraine has exposed the limits of nuclear coercion. Despite repeated Russian nuclear threats, Ukraine has neither been deterred nor intimidated, demonstrating that the effectiveness of deterrence ultimately depends not only on military capabilities but also on the stakes involved and the resolve of the actors concerned.[32] More broadly, the conflict suggests that nuclear deterrence does not always succeed when a nuclear-armed state seeks to coerce or deter a non-nuclear-weapon state, as illustrated by Russia's failure to compel Ukraine through nuclear signalling.[33] By contrast, deterrence has historically proven more reliable in relationships between nuclear-armed states, where the prospect of mutual nuclear retaliation imposes powerful constraints on escalation. Therefore, the pursuit of nuclear deterrence, whether direct or extended, will remain a key priority for Ukraine's post-war defence strategy and military planning.

Against this backdrop, the paper examines four broad models of

Better", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 25|17 (March 2025), https://www.iai.it/en/node/19805.

[29] Tucker, Maxim, "Could Zelensky Use Nuclear Bombs? Ukraine's Options Explained", in *The Times*, 14 November 2024, https://www.thetimes.com/article/2343d101-1c8e-4ca4-a4c1-913ce31e9e42.

[30] Sinovets, Polina and Adérito Vicente, "How to Deter Russia", cit.

[31] Sinovets, Polina and Adérito Vicente, "The Day After: The Impact of Russia's Invasion on Ukrainian Political Elites' and Public Attitudes toward Nuclear Weapons", in *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4-6 (2023), p. 197-219, DOI 10.1080/10736700.2024.2436663; New Europe Center, *Foreign Policy and Security. Opinions of Ukrainian Society-2025. Part 1*, 3 December 2025, https://neweurope.org.ua/en/?p=20368.

[32] Sinovets, Polina and Adérito Vicente, "Are Nuclear Weapons Ineffective in Deterring Non-Nuclear Weapon States? The Paradox of Russia's War on Ukraine", in *Note de la FRS*, No. 42/2022 (19 December 2022), https://www.frstrategie.org/web/documents/publications/notes/2022/202242.pdf.

[33] Ibid.

security guarantees, comparing their design, strengths, weaknesses and strategic consequences. We begin, however, by analysing the broader context of post-war security for Ukraine within the evolving European nuclear order.

1. Post-war security for Ukraine in the European nuclear order

Throughout the war Moscow started on 24 February 2022, Russian officials, politicians and state media have repeatedly issued nuclear threats, and hinted that nuclear weapons might be used. The main message has been consistent: any substantial crossing of Moscow's "red lines" would raise the risk of nuclear escalation. Moscow defines those red lines broadly, ranging from direct Western military intervention in the war to extensive arms transfers to Ukraine, thereby widening the scope of actions that could be framed as escalatory.[34]

Nearly five years of war underscored the central role of nuclear coercion as a form of manipulative "power to hurt", combining deterrence and compellence

Nearly five years of war have underscored the central role of nuclear coercion as a form of manipulative "power to hurt" (diplomacy based on the threat of brute force), combining deterrence and compellence.[35] During the war, Russian deterrence has yielded clear effects: it contributed to further discouraging third-party intervention, including by NATO, the world's most powerful nuclear alliance.

A notable exception occurred in autumn 2022, when, amid Ukrainian counteroffensive operations, Moscow reportedly signalled a heightened willingness to contemplate the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The Joe Biden Administration (2021-25) responded with both public warnings and private communications indicating that nuclear use could trigger severe conventional retaliation by the United States and its allies.[36] Given the persistent nuclear shadow among nuclear-armed states, even conventional escalation entails significant risks for a nuclear confrontation. These signals likely contributed to Moscow's decision not to employ nuclear weapons.

This episode represents a rare instance of the US extending deterrence against Russia beyond its conventional deterrence perimeter and formal alliance commitments to prevent what would have been a system-altering precedent: the first use of nuclear weapons since 1945.[37] To be sure, no explicit nuclear signalling emanated from the

[34] Sinovets, Polina, "Fifty Shades of Red: Where Russia Draws the Red Line?", in *NDC Outlooks*, No. 3 (December 2023, updated on 28 March 2025), https://www.ndc.nato.int/?p=2594.
[35] Schelling, Thomas C., *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966.
[36] Sinovets, Polina and Muhammed Ali Alkış, "Deterrence, Compellence, or Credibility Fatigue?", cit.
[37] Woodward, Bob, *War*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2024.

White House during the autumn 2022 crisis.[38] However, in interactions between nuclear-armed states, even the threat of initiating a conventional military operation carries an inherent risk of nuclear escalation. Consequently, such signalling cannot be regarded as purely conventional, as it is inevitably shaped by the latent possibility of nuclear confrontation. Such an event could have undermined the nuclear order underpinning the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and encouraged further reliance on nuclear coercion. This episode also highlighted a surprising continuity in how both President Biden and his successor (and predecessor) Donald Trump perceive nuclear risk. As leading Russia expert Fiona Hill notes, leaders shaped by Cold War experiences, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, remain wary of lowering the nuclear threshold below "intermediate or strategic weapons".[39]

The Biden and Trump Administrations have diverged is in their likely responses

Where the Biden and Trump Administrations have diverged is in their likely responses. The former demonstrated a willingness to reinforce deterrence through explicit public signalling and private messaging, alongside sustained military, economic and diplomatic support for Ukraine. At the same time, it remained cautious about avoiding direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia, assuming that such engagement could trigger a dangerous escalation dynamic between two nuclear-armed powers. As illustrated by Herman Kahn's escalation ladder, crises between nuclear adversaries typically begin with political threats, coercive diplomacy and conventional military exchanges before potentially progressing to higher and more dangerous levels of escalation. Consequently, the Biden Administration sought to balance robust support for Ukraine with measures designed to minimise the risk of inadvertent escalation towards a broader NATO–Russia conflict and, ultimately, nuclear confrontation.[40] By contrast, the Trump Administration has shown a much more restrained attitude, potentially reducing deterrence credibility and increasing Kyiv's exposure to Moscow's coercion.[41]

Russia's use of nuclear compellence has thus produced mixed effects. While frequent nuclear threats gradually eroded their credibility, they have nonetheless constrained Western decision-making, particularly regarding advanced weapons transfers.[42]

Both the Biden Administration's cautious and delayed delivery

[38] Madhani, Aamer and Zeke Miller, "Biden Says Nuclear 'Armageddon' at Highest Risk since Cuban Missile Crisis", in *PBS News*, 6 October 2022, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/biden-says-nuclear-armageddon-at-highest-risk-since-cuban-missile-crisis.

[39] "In Conversation with Fiona Hill on Donald Trump's Nuclear Nightmares", in *Engelsberg Ideas*, 3 June 2025, https://engelsbergideas.com/?p=14421.

[40] Kahn, Herman, *On Escalation. Metaphors and Scenarios*, New York, Praeger, 1965.

[41] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, cit.

[42] Sinovets, Polina and Muhammed Ali Alkış, "Deterrence, Compellence, or Credibility Fatigue?", cit.

of systems such as Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) and the Trump Administration's earlier reluctance to provide certain capabilities such as Tomahawk missiles reflect decisions that were in part responses to Russian nuclear compellence. Whereas Biden publicly blamed Putin for inhumane conduct, Trump has been more willing to attribute decency or benign intent to the Russian leader. That difference matters. A US policy prioritising rapid conflict termination has placed pressure on Kyiv to accept unfavourable terms. In such a situation securing credible post-war guarantees becomes imperative, whether through external commitments or enhanced self-reliance.

This dynamic has revived longstanding European anxieties concerning the reliability and limits of extended deterrence.[43] Russian nuclear signalling during the war in Ukraine has exposed the extent to which Western strategic restraint may be shaped by fears of escalation, thereby reinforcing perceptions that nuclear coercion can constrain allied decision-making even in the absence of direct confrontation.[44] The resulting uncertainty has intensified debates over the credibility of American security guarantees and the degree to which European allies can continue to depend indefinitely on Washington's willingness to incur potentially existential risks on their behalf.[45]

Since NATO's foundation in 1949, the United States has been the cornerstone of European security through extended nuclear deterrence

Since NATO's foundation in 1949, the United States has been the cornerstone of European security through extended nuclear deterrence. However, this commitment has long been accompanied by doubts regarding its credibility, encapsulated in the question of whether Washington would risk its own cities to defend European allies. As Henry Kissinger, noted: "European allies should not keep asking us to multiply strategic assurances that we cannot possibly mean, or if we do mean, we should not want to execute as we risk the

[43] Laya, Arancha González et al., "Trump-Proofing Europe: How the Continent Can Prepare for American Abandonment", in *Foreign Affairs*, 2 February 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1131310; Lippert, Barbara and Stefan Mair (eds.), "With, Without, Against Washington: Redefining Europe's Relations with the United States", in *SWP Research Papers*, No. 2026/05 (March 2026), https://doi.org/10.18449/2026RP05.

[44] Sinovets, Polina and Muhammed Ali Alkış, "Deterrence, Compellence, or Credibility Fatigue?", cit.

[45] Gasser, Paige, "Toward a New Strategic Approach to U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence", in *Livermore Papers on Global Security*, No. 15 (August 2025), https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-12/forweb-cl251210-Toward%20a%20New%20Strategic%20Approach%20to%20U.S.%20Extended%20Nuclear%20Deterrence-WEB.pdf; Sinovets, Polina and Adérito Vicente, "Europe's Nuclear Alternatives: A Time of Reckoning", in *IAI Papers*, No. 25|13 (June 2026), https://www.iai.it/en/node/20345; Bunde, Tobias et al., *Mind the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe's Nuclear Options. Report of the European Nuclear Study Group*, St. Gallen, University of St. Gallen et al., February 2026, https://doi.org/10.47342/SNSE5421; Webley-Brown, Helen and Lauren Sukin, "Divisions at Home, Broken Promises Abroad? How Domestic Politics Shapes the United States' Nuclear Credibility", in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (June 2026), Article sqag023, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqag023.

destruction of civilization".[46]

In recent years, these concerns have intensified. The "pivot to Indo-Pacific" announced by the Barack Obama Administration (2009-17), and the Trump administrations' scepticism towards NATO have both signalled a potential reordering of US strategic priorities.[47] Elbridge Colby, the current Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, before joining government had articulated a more restrictive approach, arguing that "the more pertinent question is whether NATO should withdraw from the more vulnerable states in Eastern Europe, especially the Baltic states, that create demands on the US military while adding little to the alliance's strength".[48] Since taking office he has pursued a more measured line, confirming US willingness to maintain extended nuclear deterrence but placing it into a rebalanced transatlantic alliance in which conventional power would be mostly be provided by European countries.

From US perspective, non-NATO states such as Ukraine or Georgia present high escalation risks while offering limited strategic returns

From this perspective, non-NATO states such as Ukraine or Georgia present high escalation risks while offering limited strategic returns, particularly given Russia's capacity for nuclear escalation dominance. This logic helps explain the ambivalence in US policy: while Russia possesses a vast nuclear arsenal, it is often treated as a regional rather than an existential threat to the United States. Consequently, Washington under Trump has framed its role in the Ukraine war as that of a mediator rather than a direct belligerent, prioritising the avoidance of great-power conflict. This approach aligns with a broader tendency towards "flexible realism", which emphasises stability and restraint over ideological competition.[49]

However, recent analysis, including a report from the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center, suggests that Russia continues to seek to undermine NATO cohesion and could within the next three years attempt a limited incursion into NATO's north-eastern flank that "could result in a fait accompli before NATO can reach political

[46] Kissinger, Henry A., "The Future of NATO", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1979), p. 3-17, DOI 10.1080/01636607909450733.

[47] White House, *Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament*, Canberra, 17 November 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament; White House, *National Security Strategy*, February 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf; White House, *Fact Sheet: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific*, 16 November 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific; US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "Chapter 4: China and the U.S. Rebalance to Asia", in *2016 Annual Report to Congress*, 2019, p. 475-506, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-11/Chapter%204%20China%20and%20the%20U.S.%20Rebalance%20to%20Asia.pdf; White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, cit.; US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy 2026*, cit.

[48] Colby, Elbridge A., *The Strategy of Denial. American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2021, p. 74.

[49] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, cit.

A significant military US drawdown from Europe would increase pressure on European states to assume greater responsibility for their own security

consensus".[50]

A significant military US drawdown from Europe, which is under review at the Pentagon, would increase pressure on European states to assume greater responsibility for their own security. This could, in turn, revive debates over nuclear proliferation or alternative forms of extended deterrence.[51] France and the United Kingdom have intensified coordination through the 2025 Northwood Declaration, while French proposals for *dissuasion avancée* indicate a willingness to expand the geographical scope of nuclear guarantees. The enhanced cooperation covers seven European states, including Poland, Germany, Sweden and Greece.[52] These developments suggest an embryonic, though still uncertain, Europeanisation of nuclear deterrence.

Against this backdrop, Ukraine faces difficult strategic choices. While the immediate priority remains ending the war, long-term security planning is essential. Public opinion reflects growing scepticism towards NATO membership and increasing interest in alternative security arrangements, including, controversially, the potential acquisition of nuclear capabilities.[53] Although such support remains conditional and contested, it underscores the perceived inadequacy of existing guarantees.

In this context, Ukraine may ultimately be compelled to explore a range of options, including strengthened conventional deterrence or, more controversially, forms of nuclear self-reliance.

2. Four Models of Post-War Security Guarantees for Ukraine

The question of Ukraine's post-war security architecture has become central to the future of European and transatlantic order in light of Russia's sustained aggression and repeated nuclear signalling. Any durable settlement must therefore address not only Ukraine's immediate defence needs but also the broader challenge of deterring a nuclear-armed adversary. In this context, four principal models of security guarantees can be identified, each differing in their

[50] Rosenbach, Eric et al., "Russian Threats to NATO's Eastern Flank: Scenarios, Strategy, and Policy for European Security", in *Belfer Center Reports*, February 2026, p. 5, https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/russia-nato-baltics-scenarios-europe-security.

[51] Economist, "Can Europe do Nuclear Deterrence without America?", in *The Economist*, 2 February 2026, https://www.economist.com/europe/2026/02/02/can-europe-do-nuclear-deterrence-without-america.

[52] Abboud, Leila and Ian Bott, "France Offers to Deploy Nuclear Deterrent Across Europe for First Time", in *Financial Times*, 2 March 2026, https://www.ft.com/content/45d90eeb-5084-4c22-8d4a-9fdb223759fb.

[53] Sinovets, Polina and Adérito Vicente "The Day After", cit.; KIIS, *Attitude towards Ukraine's Restoration of Nuclear Weapons*, cit.

institutional framework, degree of nuclear backing and implications for escalation dynamics. These range from flexible, (i) ad hoc arrangements led by the United States and the two European nuclear powers, to a full integrated (ii) NATO-centred nuclear deterrence, as well as alternative (iii) EU-based security guarantees and, finally, a return to (iv) neutrality.

2.1 Model I: Ad hoc security guarantees

In Model I, Ukraine would rely on an ad hoc coalition of "guarantors" led by nuclear weapon states, the United States, United Kingdom and France, rather than formal alliance membership. This arrangement could take the form of bilateral security guarantees, a "coalition of the willing", or an expanded Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), as proposed by former British member of parliament Tobias Ellwood and others.[54]

Under the first model, guarantor states would commit to defending Ukraine through formal security assurances, explicitly incorporating nuclear-backed deterrence

Under this model, guarantor states would commit to defending Ukraine through formal security assurances, explicitly incorporating nuclear-backed deterrence. Participating allies would coordinate both conventional and nuclear capabilities in support of Ukraine's defence. One variant envisages a bilateral approach, whereby Washington would underpin the system through security guarantees similar to those extended to such Indo-Pacific allies as Japan, South Korea and Australia. Alternatively, a multilateral "coalition of the willing" could be formed, potentially incorporating all three nuclear powers. A further variant envisages a European-led arrangement, developed by France and the United Kingdom in consultation with the United States. As a recent UK parliamentary report observes, these two nuclear powers are already at the forefront of discussions on deterrence and security guarantees in Europe, whether through the 2025 Northwood Declaration or France's concept of *dissuasion avancée*.[55] In this context, proposals such as Benjamin Tallis's suggestion to merge the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force with the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force into a "Joint European Defence Initiative" (JEDI) point to potential pathways for strengthening Ukraine's defence and enhancing deterrence against Russia.[56]

This model distributes the burden of defence, with Washington, London and Paris jointly supporting Ukraine. Its flexibility enables

[54] Tallis, Benjamin, "Security Guarantees for Ukraine", in *DGAP Policy Briefs*, No. 21 (June 2023), https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP-PolicyBrief-2023-21-EN-BenTallis_0.pdf.
[55] UK House of Commons Defence Committee, *The UK's Contribution to European Security. Sixth Report of Session 2024-26*, 10 November 2025, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmdfence/520/report.html.
[56] Tallis, Benjamin, "Security Guarantees for Ukraine", cit.

This model distributes the burden of defence, with Washington, London and Paris jointly supporting Ukraine

it to circumvent the political constraints associated with NATO enlargement or EU treaty reform. Existing frameworks, such as the Anglo-French Lancaster House Treaties and the Northwood Declaration, could facilitate coordination.[57] Overall, extended nuclear deterrence outside NATO may reassure Ukraine by signalling that foreign aggression would entail the risk of direct confrontation with multiple nuclear-armed states, thereby raising Russia's escalation threshold while preserving transatlantic burden-sharing and avoiding the marginalisation of a non-NATO European state.

However, this model presents significant limitations. Security guarantees provided outside NATO would need to be formalised through an ad hoc treaty arrangement, given the constitutional and political constraints associated with extending nuclear deterrence commitments. Even so, such guarantees would lack the integrated military structures and established decision-making mechanisms underpinning NATO's Article 5. Their effectiveness would therefore depend on political will and institutional capacity to operationalise treaty obligations in a manner comparable to that achieved by NATO during the 1950s and 1960s. Depending on the speed and scope of these efforts, concerns regarding credibility could intensify. Should the United States or other guarantors recalibrate their commitments – whether due to leadership change or strategic reprioritisation – the arrangement could weaken. Moreover, a small coalition may appear less formidable to Russia than NATO as a whole, potentially inviting challenges. This approach would also sideline other allies. An independent Western nuclear coalition could thus be portrayed as inconsistent. Finally, without NATO's integrated planning structures, coordination between Ukrainian forces and guarantors may remain limited, reducing operational effectiveness.

2.2 Model II: NATO-centred nuclear deterrence

This model envisions Ukraine joining NATO (or being granted an Article 5-like umbrella) so that all Alliance members would be formally bound to defend it. Article 5 states that an attack on one is an attack on all; full NATO membership would thus extend NATO's nuclear

[57] UK and France, *Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the French Republic for Defence and Security Co-operation*, London, 2 November 2010, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/treaty-between-the-uk-and-france-for-defence-and-security-co-operation; UK and France, *Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the French Republic relating to Joint Radiographic/Hydrodynamics Facilities*, London, 2 November 2010, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/treaty-between-the-uk-and-france-relating-to-joint-radiographichydrodynamics-facilities; UK Government, *Lancaster House 2.0: Declaration on Modernising UK-French Defence and Security Cooperation*, 10 July 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lancaster-house-20-declaration-on-modernising-uk-french-defence-and-security-cooperation; UK and France, *Northwood Declaration*, cit.

The second model envisions Ukraine joining NATO (or being granted an Article 5-like umbrella) so that all Alliance members would be formally bound to defend it

umbrella unequivocally to Ukraine. Institutionalised commitments (integrated military planning, interoperability, deployments and perhaps even the hosting of nuclear assets) would further bind allies to Ukraine. In essence, Ukraine in NATO relies on the collective Western deterrent, with US strategic and tactical nuclear forces (and UK deterrent forces) as the ultimate guarantee.

A major strength of this model is that deterrence credibility is maximised through institutionalisation. NATO's Article 5 is the most credible security guarantee available. It is a legally binding commitment, with the nuclear dimension resting primarily on the United States and United Kingdom (France's independent deterrent is an important but separate national contribution).[58] Admission would remove ambiguity: no potential aggressor would doubt Ukraine is in the West's strongest security club. Allies would invest heavily in Ukraine's defence (more troops, bases, air defences, intelligence), further bolstering deterrence. Ideally, NATO membership in the medium to long term remains the most viable way to deter Russia and strengthen the security of Europe.[59] Institutionalisation means no single country can renege without betraying the entire Alliance. It also deeply integrates Ukraine into Euro-Atlantic defence planning, raising the price of aggression enormously.

However, one key weakness of pursuing this model lies in the formidable political obstacles to the attainment of it. Ukraine's full NATO membership remains both controversial and likely to be protracted. Some allies, including the present and future US Administrations, resist immediate accession, thereby creating a dangerous interim gap. Furthermore, Russia has long signalled that Ukrainian membership in NATO would constitute a *casus belli*, meaning that progress in this direction risks further escalation in the short term. Article 5 could, in principle, oblige the Alliance to consider a nuclear response in the event of a Russian attack on Ukraine, even if conducted by conventional means.[60] Any direct conventional confrontation between NATO and Russia could rapidly escalate to the nuclear level, thereby heightening strategic risks. Within Ukraine, there are also political divides mostly due to the lack of progress with NATO integration. However, most polling now favours joining NATO, especially after Russia's invasion.[61]

In general, the strategic consequences would be significant. Formally

[58] NATO, *NATO's Nuclear Deterrence Policy and Forces*, cit.
[59] Sinovets, Polina and Adérito Vicente, "The Day After", cit.
[60] NATO, *The North Atlantic Treaty*, Washington, 4 April 1949, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty.
[61] "Support for EU and NATO Membership among Ukrainians Has Grown, According to a Survey by the KSF", in *Kyiv Security Forum*, 11 February 2026, https://ksf.openukraine.org/en/categories/news/pidtrimka-vstupu-do-yes-ta-nato-sered-ukrayinciv.

incorporating Ukraine into NATO's deterrence framework would fundamentally reshape the Euro-Atlantic security order. While this step would likely provide the most effective deterrent against future aggression, it would also entail a high probability of a strong Russian response. Moscow could further expand its nuclear presence in Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, deploy additional nuclear-capable systems along its borders, and escalate threats against NATO allies. In a worst-case scenario, a Russian attack on Ukraine could trigger a full-scale NATO–Russia conflict. Nonetheless, eventual NATO membership – or a comparably robust Article 5-type commitment – appears to constitute the most credible long-term security guarantee.[62] In policy terms, this model underscores the importance of keeping NATO credible and ready: in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, Russia is labelled the "most significant and direct threat" and the Alliance accepts it "cannot discount the possibility of an attack" on its members.[63] Thus, implementing Model II would mean reinforcing that promise unambiguously.

2.3 Model III: EU-based security guarantees

The third model posits a European deterrent

This model shifts the locus of guarantees to the EU. Here Ukraine would receive assurances under an EU framework (not NATO). Perhaps via a special treaty, invoking Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), or a new compact.[64] This could involve significant European military cooperation and would rely on France's nuclear deterrent, with a special arrangement also involving the United Kingdom, as part of the umbrella. President Macron's March 2026 speech initiated this line: he offered France's nuclear "umbrella" to willing European allies, calling an independent deterrent the keystone of a truly autonomous defence.[65] In effect, Model III posits a "European deterrent".[66] Ukraine could be incorporated into a European security framework underpinned by the French and British nuclear deterrents, with conventional support provided by EU member states. Such an arrangement would remain fundamentally intergovernmental

[62] Sinovets, Polina and Adérito Vicente, "The Day After", cit.
[63] NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, Madrid, 29 June 2022, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/strategic-concepts/nato-2022-strategic-concept; Dolzikova, Darya, "Nuclear Deterrence and the Shifting Euro-Atlantic Security Architecture", in *RUSI Insights Papers*, 29 January 2026, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/insights-papers/nuclear-deterrence-shifting-euro-atlantic-security-architecture.
[64] European Union, *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, 15 March 2025, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/oj/eng.
[65] French Presidency, *Speech by the President of the Republic on France's Nuclear Deterrence*, cit.
[66] Vicente, Adérito, "Why Europe Needs a Nuclear Deterrent: A Critical Appraisal", in *Martens Centre Research Papers*, October 2024, https://www.martenscentre.eu/?p=11471.

or NATO-based, as the European Union lacks a legal mandate and institutional wherewithal to serve as the institutional cornerstone of defence policy – let alone nuclear deterrence. The credibility of this idea may be linked to President Macron's Île-Longue speech, in which he characterised Russia's war against Ukraine as existential for Europe.[67] He also emphasised the need to strengthen European deterrence through technical projects, referring to Ukraine as a partner in this regard.[68]

This model capitalises on Europe's institutional framework. It would bind EU member states to Ukraine's defence through Article 42.7. The logic of European strategic autonomy would be advanced, reducing US dependence. France's extended nuclear deterrent, combined with the pooling of European conventional forces, strategic enablers,[69] defence-industrial capacities and common defence funding could provide the foundation for a more autonomous European security architecture.

Macron hinted at the idea that a British backup could become invaluable.[70] A pan-European security framework may offer greater political legitimacy and long-term stability than arrangements perceived as relying exclusively on NATO or continued US leadership. While the EU does not possess integrated armed forces or a unified military command structure, greater European cooperation in defence and security could provide a more institutionally embedded basis for burden-sharing, thereby reducing concerns about the future reliability of external security guarantees. In addition, Russia's stated position does not preclude Ukraine's accession to the EU.[71] From an institutional perspective, this model may therefore be more realistic than reliance on NATO protection.

One of the principal weaknesses of this model is that the EU currently lacks a standing military structure comparable to NATO

One of the principal weaknesses of this model is that the EU currently lacks a standing military structure comparable to NATO. Although Article 42(7) TEU establishes a mutual assistance obligation, often described as the EU's mutual defence clause,[72] it explicitly recognises that, for the 23 EU member states that are also NATO allies, the Alliance "remains the foundation of their collective defence".[73]

In practice, EU security is still largely an intergovernmental, non-

[67] French Presidency, *Speech by the President of the Republic on France's Nuclear Deterrence*, cit.
[68] Ibid.
[69] For example, these resources could include intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, satellite and early-warning systems, strategic airlift capabilities, aerial refuelling platforms and secure communications networks.
[70] Witney, Nick, "Under My Parapluie: Macron's Nuclear Guarantee for Europe", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 17 March 2026, https://ecfr.eu/?p=151759.
[71] Antonov, Dmitry, "Putin Says Russia Doesn't Oppose Ukraine Joining the EU", in *Reuters*, 2 September 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/putin-says-russia-doesnt-oppose-ukraine-joining-eu-2025-09-02.
[72] European Union, *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union*, cit.
[73] Ibid.

integrated framework; there is no common EU defence force with nuclear weapons, and only one member state – France – has it. The EU has no nuclear deterrent of its own, so any guarantee would be ultimately French (or Franco-British) under EU auspices. This raises uncertainties. An effective umbrella requires beneficiaries to trust that the guarantor would run the appalling risks of resorting to nuclear use on their behalf.[74] This would be a difficult proposition to advance if it relied solely on France underwriting the security of multiple countries. While such states as Germany have experience in participating in the US extended deterrence arrangements through nuclear sharing, they have never possessed nuclear weapons of their own.

In addition, an EU-centric security guarantee would generate institutional redundancy and, more consequentially, strategic friction with the Atlantic Alliance. If EU and NATO policies diverged, it could complicate transatlantic burden-sharing. These arrangements appear to have nonetheless been informally explored by France with the United States prior to their public articulation by President Macron, indicating a deliberate, if ultimately constrained, effort to reconcile European strategic autonomy with enduring transatlantic commitments.[75]

2.4 Model IV: Neutrality

Model IV envisions Ukraine as a neutral state, possibly with new binding security assurances from nuclear powers

Model IV envisions Ukraine as a neutral state, possibly with new binding security assurances from nuclear powers.[76] This resembles the Finnish or Austrian models of the Cold War era. Ukraine would formally renounce alliances in exchange for formal commitments not to attack it. Implicitly it revives the Budapest idea: Ukraine gave up nuclear weapons under pledges to respect its sovereignty.[77]

Some American scholars have floated the "Finlandisation" of Ukraine, namely ruling out NATO membership, territorial concessions, etc., to end the war. Most notably, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 by Russia Henry Kissinger explicitly argued for a neutrality-based settlement involving territorial compromise, although he disavowed the notion after 2022.[78] Similar positions have been developed in

[74] Vicente, Adérito, "Why Europe Needs a Nuclear Deterrent", cit.
[75] Chevreuil, Astrid, "Macron's Île-Longue Speech: Updating France's Nuclear Doctrine for a New Era", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 4 March 2026, https://www.csis.org/node/121123.
[76] Kavanagh, Jennifer and Christopher McCallion, "Armed Neutrality for Ukraine Is NATO's Least Poor Option", in *War on the Rocks*, 18 February 2025, https://warontherocks.com/?p=33629.
[77] Kimball, Daryl G., "Ukraine, Nuclear Weapons, and Security Assurances at a Glance", cit.
[78] Kissinger, Henry, "To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End", in *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2014; Bester, Lukas, "Kissinger: These Are the Main Geopolitical Challenges Facing the World Right Now", in *World Economic Forum Articles*, 23 May 2022, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2022/05/kissinger-these-are-the-main-geopolitical-challenges-facing-the-world-right-now.

analytical terms by International Relations realist scholars such as John Mearsheimer.[79] More recently, elements of this logic have appeared in policy debates linked to Republican foreign policy circles, including figures such as Undersecretary Colby, who has emphasised prioritisation and restraint in US commitments, though not explicitly endorsing "Finlandisation" *per se*.[80] Overall, neutrality-based solutions have featured in policy discussions, but have not been adopted as official positions by NATO or EU governments.[81]

One of the potential strengths of neutrality is that it might placate Russia by removing Ukraine from the Western alliance orbit.[82] Therefore, it could be a possible "win–win" compromise between the West and Russia. It also acknowledges Ukraine's right to choose a different security path if NATO entry remains blocked. If security assurances from the United States, the United Kingdom and France, as well as Russia, accompanied neutrality (a new but stronger version of the Budapest Memorandum), Kyiv might feel protected against new invasions. A neutral Ukraine reduces the immediate risk of direct confrontation between NATO and Russia.

A principal weakness of this model is the 1994 precedent

A principal weakness of this model is the 1994 precedent, when Ukraine accepted security assurances under the Budapest Memorandum, which Russia subsequently violated in 2014 and again in 2022.[83] Trust in such assurances is shattered, as even during the declared neutrality of Ukraine under president Viktor Yanukovych (2010-13) Russia kept interfering in Ukrainian domestic and foreign policy, which in 2014 end provoking the Maidan events. Neutrality also relies on Russia's goodwill: but Putin's ambitions in Ukraine extend far beyond those of the Soviet Union toward Finland or Austria. As one analyst bluntly puts it, pressuring Ukraine into "Finlandisation" would be like "forcing a victim of abuse to live with their abuser", an "unjust settlement" doomed to fail.[84] Finland moved away from its post-war neutral status after the Soviet Union collapsed, quickly

[79] Mearsheimer, John J., "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014), p. 77-89; Mearsheimer, John J., "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War", in *Horizons*, No. 21 (2022), p. 12-27, https://cirsd.org/?p=2438.

[80] Velez-Green, Alex and Robert Peters, "The Prioritization Imperative: A Strategy to Defend America's Interests in a More Dangerous World", in *Heritage Foundation Special Reports*, No. 288 (1 August 2024), https://www.heritage.org/node/25157418; Youssef, Nancy A. et al., "The Pentagon's Policy Guy Is All In on China", in *The Atlantic*, 28 July 2025, https://www.theatlantic.com/national-security/archive/2025/07/pentagon-china-elbridge-colby/683677.

[81] Kavanagh, Jennifer, "An Armed Nonalignment Model for Ukraine's Postwar Security", in *Defense Priorities*, 15 December 2025, https://www.defensepriorities.org/?p=16596.

[82] Allison, Roy, "Russia, Ukraine and State Survival through Neutrality", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 6 (November 2022), p. 1849-1872, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac230.

[83] Budjeryn, Mariana, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Its Impact on the Global Nuclear Order", cit.

[84] Mefford, Brian, "The Finlandization Fallacy: Ukrainian Neutrality Will Not Stop Putin's Russia", in *UkraineAlert*, 27 February 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=829277.

joining the EU (1995) and, after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, NATO in 2023.[85] In other words, true neutrality in the face of a determined aggressor is nearly impossible to sustain.

TABLE 1 Comparative table: Security guarantee models for Ukraine

Model	Strengths	Weaknesses	Strategic consequences / escalation dynamics
Model I: Ad hoc (US-UK-France)	Flexible; avoids NATO constraints; includes nuclear deterrence; burden-sharing	Dependent on political will; coordination limits; weaker than NATO	Ambiguous thresholds; risk of miscalculation; potential rapid escalation if deterrence fails
Model II: NATO (Article 5)	Maximum credibility; institutionalised deterrence; integrated defence; clear commitment	Politically difficult; risks provoking Russia; potential for great-power war	Strongest deterrence; but high escalation risk, including NATO–Russia conflict
Model III: EU-based	Promotes European autonomy; builds on EU framework; possible French nuclear umbrella	Limited military capacity; depends on France; weak institutional coherence; NATO friction	Uncertain credibility; may complement or fragment NATO; unclear escalation thresholds
Model IV: Neutrality	May reduce short-term tensions; politically simple compromise	No credible deterrence; past failure (1994); relies on Russia; high vulnerability	Low immediate escalation, but high long-term instability; invites a future Russian aggression

Conclusion

Five years of Russia's war against Ukraine demonstrate Moscow's relentless commitment to achieving its objectives in Ukraine. Nuclear-deterrence-based guarantees should be part of Ukraine's future. Any conventional Ukrainian capability will likely be, over time, offset by the size of the Russian armed forces, Russia's military-industrial base, and the willingness to absorb Ukraine as a matter of regime survival in Moscow. Russia may not be deterred by heavy battlefield losses or drone attacks on its cities; but it can be deterred by the prospect of unacceptable damage. Nuclear weapons are a "great equalizer," bringing large states closer to parity with smaller ones. Another advantage of nuclear deterrence is that, facing possible conventional annihilation, Ukraine, or its guarantor, might be less hesitant to use such weapons. The key weakness, however, is that any guarantor providing nuclear deterrence risks being viewed as an unreliable deterrer.

[85] Ibid.

NATO membership and extended deterrence would be the most straightforward and logical way to secure Ukraine. However, even the most influential NATO members are not united on this, and US involvement in Europe is currently at its lowest point in the Alliance's history. France's *dissuasion avancée*, whether pursued bilaterally or within a broader EU framework, remains conceptually underdeveloped and raises legitimate questions about sustainability. Nevertheless, it offers one important advantage: Paris may prove more politically invested in Kyiv's fate than Washington. Although French capabilities are more limited, greater political resolve could partly offset this constraint. Should future French governments sustain this strategic direction, a more credible European deterrent architecture may gradually emerge. By contrast, neutrality remains the least viable option. It would distance Ukraine from meaningful guarantors, weaken deterrence, and risk recreating the very strategic ambiguity that enabled previous Russian aggression. For Moscow, neutrality is more likely to be interpreted as a security vacuum than as a stabilising compromise. We, therefore, conclude that any durable settlement will depend on guarantees that combine clear political resolve with credible military – including nuclear – enforcement.

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