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THE TIME OF HAWKS: HOW HARDLINERS ARE RESHAPING EURO-ATLANTIC POLITICS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Russia and the United States, foreign policy is increasingly shaped by hardline security elites whose rise both reflects and accelerates the return of coercive power politics.

In Europe, while foreign policy remains formally anchored in multilateralism, a growing process of securitization is shifting the EU toward a more geopolitical and security-centered posture.

Together, these developments suggest a systemic erosion of diplomatic restraint, with possible outcomes ranging from a sustained “Concert of Hawks” to a gradual return to pragmatic accommodation driven by domestic constraints.

KEYWORDS:

Geopolitics, Deterrence, Securitization, European Defense

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In Russland und den USA wird Außenpolitik zunehmend von kompromisslosen Sicherheitseliten geprägt, deren Aufstieg die Rückkehr von Machtpolitik sowohl widerspiegelt als auch beschleunigt.

In Europa bleibt die Außenpolitik zwar formal im Multilateralismus verankert, doch ein zunehmender Prozess der Versicherheitlichung verschiebt die EU hin zu einer stärker geopolitischen und sicherheitszentrierten Ausrichtung.

Zusammengenommen deuten diese Entwicklungen auf eine systemische Erosion diplomatischer Zurückhaltung hin, mit möglichen Folgen, die von einem anhaltenden „Konzert der Falken“ bis zu einer allmählichen Rückkehr zu pragmatischer Verständigung aufgrund innenpolitischer Zwänge reichen.

KEYWORDS:

Geopolitik, Abschreckung, Sekuritisierung, Europäische Verteidigung

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EURO-ATLANTIC POLITICS

On September 18, 2025, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov announced the resignation of Deputy Chief of Staff Dmitry Kozak, one of Vladimir Putin's longtime aides. Kozak was reportedly among the few figures close to Putin who openly criticized the February 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine. Kozak had led negotiations with Kyiv prior to the war, including within the Normandy Format. In early 2025, Kozak urged Putin to halt hostilities and pursue peace talks (Troianovski, 2025). His removal is a clear signal of the narrowing range of views tolerated within the Kremlin.

Kozak was replaced by Sergei Kiriyenko, a Kremlin loyalist and one of the most prominent political architects of Russia's wartime governance, who has consistently supported the invasion of Ukraine. Before that, he had



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assumed several key responsibilities, including the oversight of relations with post-Soviet states such as Georgia and Moldova, both of which have historically gravitated toward Western alignment. Therefore, what appeared as a routine personnel reshuffle carries deeper

significance, signaling the narrowing of foreign policy options.

This episode is not unique to Russia. Across autocratic regimes and advanced democracies, foreign policy is increasingly organized around permanent readiness, deterrence-first strategy, and military capability. Governments are expanding defense mandates, prioritizing crisis response over conflict prevention, and narrowing the political space for negotiated compromise. This shift is driven both by structural pressures, including intensifying great-power rivalry and the erosion of arms-control regimes, and by political leadership that actively embraces coercive power politics as a governing principle. Together, these dynamics point to a systemic transformation of international politics in which restraint is no longer the dominant organizing logic.

In this report, “restraint” denotes a foreign policy orientation that prioritizes diplomacy, negotiated compromise, and the avoidance of military escalation, even amid strategic rivalry. “Hawkishness” or hardline politics, by contrast, refers to the privileging of deterrence and military readiness, the narrowing of acceptable policy options, and the growing influence of security elites in shaping foreign policy. The following sections examine how this shift from restraint toward hawkishness unfolds in practice across different political systems.

HOW RESTRAINT DIES

The rise of hardline security thinking is both a product of changing global structures and the result of political leadership. In systems like Putin's Russia or Trump's United States, a narrow circle of decision-makers actively drives and accelerates a more confrontational foreign policy. In Europe, by contrast, the shift toward security-centered politics is primarily reactive—shaped by external shocks such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine rather than by the emergence of an ideologically hardline leadership. In practice, the erosion of restraint takes place through three distinct developments: elite turnover that narrows the range of tolerated views; leadership-driven personnel choices that actively privilege hardline positions; and institutional securitization, in which policy instruments and strategic frameworks increasingly prioritize deterrence and military readiness over diplomacy.

The perfect example of those trends is the United States, which has long functioned as a trend-setter in global politics. There, Donald Trump's second term marks an acceleration toward a more confrontational posture, reflected in increasingly aggressive rhetoric—including threats toward allies such as Canada and Danish Greenland—as well as the deployment of US military force in Venezuela, where strikes on Caracas and a subsequent operation resulted in the capture of President Nicolás Maduro and his transfer to the US for prosecution without involvement of international institutions.

This shift is evident in the contrast between Trump's first-term defense secretary, James Mattis, a staunch supporter of NATO who called the alliance “the most successful military alliance in modern history” (BBC, 2017), and his second-term appointee, Pete Hegseth. Under Hegseth, US defense policy has become explicitly transactional, treating alliances as conditional rather

than foundational, and signaling a departure from established norms of collective security and restraint (Bergmann, 2025; Sabbagh, 2025). His assertion that the United States can no longer prioritize European security, and that allies should not assume a permanent American presence, signals a decisive break with earlier norms of restraint and collective security (Sabbagh, 2025).

This evolution is further illustrated by internal shifts in US Ukraine policy. In November 2025, President Trump's Special Envoy for Ukraine, Lieutenant General Keith Kellogg, who is widely viewed in Kyiv and European capitals as a key advocate for sustained US engagement in Russia's war against Ukraine, informed associates that he plans to leave the administration in January 2026. His departure would remove one of the administration's strongest institutional voices in favor of continued support for Ukraine and reflects the broader reorientation of US foreign policy away from long-term security commitments (Slattery & Pamuk, 2025).

To a lesser extent, the trend is also perceptible in Europe. Historically, the European Union defined itself as a project of peace, economic integration, and civilian power, relying primarily on diplomacy and normative influence rather than military force. “The European Union has always prided itself on its soft power – and it will keep doing so, because we are the best in this field.” (European Union External Action Service, 2016). Over the past decade, however, a gradual process of securitization has taken hold. The adoption of the 2016 Global Strategy (EUGS) marked a shift toward a more security-centered approach to crisis management, which was further reinforced by successive external shocks: the 2015 migration crisis and its 2021 aftershock at the EU's eastern border, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The difference in tone between the EUGS and the 2022 Strategic Compass is clearly

perceptible and was further reinforced by the “era of rearmament” announced by the Commission in 2025 (Simonet, 2025).

One could observe how a number of chiefs of military staff and intelligence services recently called for anticipating an open conflict with Russia, marking a clear departure from a traditionally cautious and technocratic language. For example, General Fabien Mandon, France’s Army Chief of Staff, sparked controversy in late 2025 by warning France must be prepared to “lose its children” in a potential war with Russia (Goury-Laffont & Kayali, 2025). Similarly, Germany’s Chief of Defense, General Carsten Breuer, has argued that Europe must be ready for war in the near term, warning that intelligence assessments pointing to a possible confrontation by 2029 offer no guarantee against an earlier escalation and that the Bundeswehr must therefore be “able to fight tonight” (Gardner & Wong, 2025).

The prominence of such rhetoric from senior political and military figures points to a broader transformation in European security culture, in which military readiness and deterrence are no longer treated as exceptional but as unavoidable. This shift is evident in the rhetoric of EU High Representative Kaja Kallas, who has emerged as one of the Union’s most outspoken advocates of hard security. “We must spend more to prevent war. But we also need to prepare for war,” she argued, framing military preparedness as a prerequisite for peace (Reuters, 2025a). Coming from the EU’s chief diplomat, such language signals a profound shift in Europe’s security self-understanding—“quite a change in its DNA” for a union long defined by civilian soft power and diplomatic restraint (Simonet, 2025). On January 22, Kallas launched a vibrant call to invest in European defense to counter Russia. On March 19, the Commission and the High Representative presented a White Paper for European

Defense—Readiness 2030 with solutions to close critical capability gaps and build a strong defense industrial base. “We are in an era of rearmament. And Europe is ready to massively boost its defence spending,” the President of the European Commission emphasized (Von der Leyen, 2025).



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A similar pattern is perceptible in NATO under Secretary-General Mark Rutte, in office since October 1, 2024. In December 2025, Rutte warned that “Russia has brought war back to Europe” and that “we must be prepared,” arguing that Moscow could be capable of attacking a NATO member within five years if deterrence is not strengthened (Reuters, 2025b). His remarks demonstrate how deterrence and military readiness are increasingly treated as permanent necessities rather than temporary responses to crises.

Can these changes in rhetoric be turned into possible scenarios in the near and long term? Distinguishing between political, economic, social, and security risks, two different trajectories can be outlined.

BETWEEN RESTRAINT AND RUIN

The first scenario, drawing on historical analogy, can be described as a Concert of Hawks. In this configuration, more conflict-oriented perspectives would dominate decision-making in both NATO countries and Russia, while institutional dynamics reinforce increasingly rigid security postures. Diplomacy is reduced to crisis management rather than prevention, and the declining role of international law and multilateralism increases the risk that limited conflicts—such as Ukraine or Gaza—escalate into large-scale war. This resembles a return to Cold War logic, but without the stabilizing arms-control frameworks that once contained it, making the international system highly vulnerable to miscalculation (Sarotte, 2022).

The second trajectory points to a gradual return to Business as Usual, as sustained rearmament collides with economic, social, and political constraints—particularly in welfare states where defense spending competes with social protection. The economic impact of the “Rearm Europe” process is stark and bears the risk of a self-inflicted economic and social crisis. This “would fundamentally transform European societies—turning them into nations where social justice and economic stability are subordinated to military buildup” (Dagdelen, 2025). In France, where the public deficit amounts to 5.8% of the GDP and the public debt reaches 113% of the GDP, the challenge will be high (Claeys et al., 2025). As militarization becomes fiscally and socially unsustainable, pressure grows for inward-looking governance and pragmatic accommodation. Although this shift toward deterrence-first strategy now appears embedded in defense planning, procurement cycles, alliance commitments, and long-term military investment programs, its long-term stability is uncertain: economic pressure, social resistance to welfare retrenchment, declining public tolerance for permanent mobilization, electoral turnover,



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and elite fatigue may all act as trend breakers. Paradoxically, the dominance of hawks may also facilitate de-escalation, as shared security worldviews enable tacit rules and negotiated restraint. Ultimately, in societies accustomed to material comfort, living standards—rather than military ambitions—are likely to reassert themselves as the basis of political legitimacy as the long-term costs of confrontation become more visible.

European classical authors have long mocked the bourgeoisie for craving comfort—preferring safety, routine, and the quiet pleasures of ordinary life over the drama of history. Yet in the world now taking shape, that once-ridiculed instinct may prove unexpectedly decisive. Against calls to restore “historic borders,” reclaim “greatness,” or defend national interests at any cost, the more radical aspiration may be far simpler: to live without fear. As global politics grows louder and more militarized, the decisive force may ultimately be not the hawks in government, but societies that continue to value dignity, stability, and normalcy—and that choose life over spectacle rather than allowing confrontation to become their destiny.

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