

Washington Summit on Ukraine: The Return of Realpolitik and Secret Diplomacy

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The organization of the summit by the White House and not by a European capital show that the real center of decision-making for the security and future of Ukraine remains in Washington. European leaders participated, but their role was more confirmatory than leading.

The footage from the Oval Office speaks of a story of Europe's failure, where five European heads of government, once organizers of global peace conferences, appear hunched over the US President's table, as if begging him for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as much as for themselves.

This is the most realistic image of the actual situation in Europe in 2025.

Why Europe is seen as geopolitically secondary
There are several factors that have imposed this image of Europe today. But above all, five essential factors can be highlighted:

- Dependence on the US in military terms: NATO, that is, European security, is de facto based on American forces and arsenals.
- Political fragmentation: The EU does not have a common foreign and defense policy; decisions depend on consensus among the 27 member states of this voluntary political union.
- Lack of powerful military instruments: despite having strong economies, European countries do not yet have a credible integrated force that can rival American influence.
- Internal crises (energy, migration, the rise of right-wing extremism) weaken the EU's negotiating power.
- Washington has the key words for the course of the war: what advanced weapons to send, how to manage the strategy towards Russia, and how far to go in involvement.

Consequently, we have significant strategic implications for the three most directly affected parties.

For Russia: this reality is confirmation that the war is a confrontation mainly with the US, not only with Ukraine.

For the EU: this deepening dependence makes Europe a secondary actor, limiting its role to a more economic and normative space than a military-strategic one.

For Ukraine: its future depends more on the elections in the US than on decisions in Brussels or Berlin.

Hence the conclusion that, despite the participation of several heads of European governments in the Washington meeting, the **Main fact remains:** geopolitically Europe remains a second-rate power and still does not have the capacity to lead the game in international security issues.

Geopolitical balance

With the war in the former Yugoslavia, Europe had managed to significantly correct the Russian penetration into Southeastern Europe, claiming to return to the decision-making table.

Meanwhile, with the war in Ukraine, the Europeans have not achieved any of their goals...

At the beginning of the war, they hesitated to help Ukraine defend its sovereignty. They remained silent before the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014!

With the resumption of the large-scale war by Russia in 2022, which had as its objective the complete occupation of Ukraine, there were again fluctuations. Only after a titanic resistance of the Ukrainian people did Europe wake up from that sleepwalking and begin to engage in helping Ukraine win the war to restore its territorial integrity, to retake Crimea.

This objective was about a new European strategy that was about restoring order and peace in Europe, rebuilding a new European security architecture, after having inflicted a strategic defeat on Russia like the ones suffered by the USSR in Afghanistan [1].

The objectives declared by Europe were clear.

- To stop Russia quickly with sanctions it was assumed that the Russian economy would collapse.
- To strengthen Ukraine until military victory by arming it and keeping it alive economically.
- To show political unity and affirm itself as a geopolitical power in the face of the greatest security crisis since the Cold War.
- To reduce dependence on the US and build "strategic autonomy".

Through ever-increasing sanctions, Brussels seemed to want to strangle Russia's war economy, win the international community over to its side, apply strategies based on morality and ethics, and

increase political pressure. The Europeans wanted to exclude Russia globally, bring Putin to the International Criminal Court, and then force the Russian Federation to pay massive reparations.

None of these objectives were achieved! Therefore, skepticism is justified. The geopolitical balance is in favor of Russia and partly the United States.

The United States emerged as a relative winner: it strengthened control over Europe, increased sales of LNG and weapons.

Russia, although damaged, survived the pressure and held on to the occupied territory.

Meanwhile, Europe remained the biggest relative loser: without a clear strategy, without military power, with a battered economy and a limited role alongside the United States.

With the war in Ukraine, the Europeans failed to stop Russia, nor to empower Ukraine to victory, nor to assert themselves as an independent geopolitical actor. On the contrary, Europe appeared fragmented, dependent and economically weakened.

Back to the 19th Century

The R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago since 1982, John J. Mearsheimer, a well-known proponent of the theory of realism in international relations, further believes that great powers dominate the international system and are constantly engaged in security competition with each other, which sometimes leads to war.[2]

In his famous article “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault” (2014), Mearsheimer argues that the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU particularly the inclusion of Ukraine in the Western sphere is the main cause of the crisis. He considers this a “first-class political error” that prompted Russia to react to protect its immediate strategic interests from its borders. Mearsheimer has called the war in Ukraine a “tragedy of the great powers” that is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. He emphasizes that without a diplomatic solution, the conflict is more likely to remain frozen than to end in complete victory [3].

This confrontation of more than three years in this plan can be said to have failed. The Russian war economy survived, and with it the ruble, new markets in Asia and Africa softened the effect of sanctions.

Ukraine did not gain strategic ground: the war is frozen, the losses are colossal, and military aid is not enough.

Europe showed dependence, not independence: without the USA, Ukraine would have collapsed; NATO was confirmed as the only axis of security.

Domestic crises: rising energy prices, inflation, blow to European industry (especially Germany).

Growth of political extremism:

Eurosceptic and pro-Russian forces are gaining ground in many countries.

Moscow can now implement what was unthinkable only last year: to continue occupying territories while negotiations are taking place in the Oval Office in Washington, to discuss territorial

concessions as in the 19th century, and without one warring party even being at the negotiating table.

These scenes cannot help but remind the Albanian reader of the two European conferences – that of Berlin [1878] and that of London [1913], when Albania, through the flow from all four corners of its geography, was being transformed into a torso, even without the presence of Albanians at those conferences.

The return to this logic of the organization and flow of conferences reflects the rapid decline of the authority of rules that were supposed to be eternal. These rules were imposed on the parties and were applied only as long as all the actors adhered to them. See for this, since the mid-1970s, as with the Helsinki Conference, international conflicts have been negotiated multilaterally, ideally before the court of the international community, accompanied by press conferences and media transparency. This order is now being overturned.

This order has been eroded by globalization, the new self-confidence of the Global South, Russian revanchism, and Western double standards.[4] In the current decade, it is being dismantled, with all its ugly consequences. The USSR T-shirt worn by the Russian Foreign Minister upon his arrival in Alaska is the best evidence of the collapse of that order. The claim was clear: Russia claims to return to where Joseph Stalin was at Yalta. On equal terms.

The return of realpolitik and secret diplomacy

In reality, interest-based realpolitik and secret diplomacy, once thought to have been overcome, are now clearly seen to be dominating.

The war in Ukraine has brought back classic realpolitik – national interests, secret agreements and strategic bargaining overshadowing the proclaimed ideals of democracy, solidarity and international law. The consequences for security in Europe are far-reaching and long-term.

The illusions of the “liberal order” are coming to an end. Europe after 1991 believed that the future was built on cooperation, international law and institutions (UN, OSCE, EU). The war in Ukraine showed that these mechanisms cannot deter a nuclear power like Russia. Realpolitik is taking the place of normativism, turning the continent into an arena of classic power rivalries.

In these circumstances, the return of the militarization of the old continent cannot remain without consequences. Serbia has been the leader in this race for more than a decade. Meanwhile, as The Jerusalem Post reports, Serbia is closing in on a new \$1.6 billion deal with Israeli defense electronics company Elbit Systems Ltd [5].

Last week, Israeli defense electronics company Elbit Systems Ltd. announced that a European country had signed a \$1.63 billion contract to supply a range of defense solutions, to be delivered over a five-year period. Globes has learned that the customer is Serbia. The order consists of two product groups.

The first group includes long-range high-precision artillery-missile systems and a wide range of unmanned reconnaissance and mobile air combat systems, from operational to tactical ranges, including personally piloted drones.

The second group includes sophisticated ISTAR capabilities, including SIGINT, COMINT, and electronic warfare systems. Enabled intelligence collection and processing systems will also be delivered, along with advanced electro-optical (E/O) and night vision systems, combat vehicle upgrades, and defense systems.

In addition, Elbit Systems will provide comprehensive military digitalization and Networked Warfare Solutions, based on the latest generation of software and state-of-the-art communication hardware. This includes intelligence solutions from the C4ISR command and control application suite [6]. EU countries are also acting in this spirit, increasing defense budgets to levels not seen since the Cold War. Germany declared a *Zeitenwende* (epochal change), but implementation is slow and costly. Europe is turning from an economic and normative project into a militarized space where security dominates over social development.

The return of realpolitik and covert diplomacy is nowhere more evident than in the wave of pacification of international conflicts caused by the Trump administration. Whether in the South Caucasus between Azerbaijan and Armenia, in South Asia between India and Pakistan, or in the war in Ukraine: Henry Kissinger-style boat diplomacy and press conferences without journalists' questions. The US president is practicing the brutal recapture of political freedom of action through politics, concludes German analyst Thomas Fassbender [7].

Fragmentation and competition for secret alliances

Beyond the rhetoric of unity, European countries are acting according to their own interests. Hungary, Slovakia and Serbia are flirting with Moscow. France is testing "special channels" for negotiations with Russia. Poland and the Baltic states see security only through the US and NATO. Political Albania, the Republic of Kosovo and Croatia see it necessary to sign the historic agreement for the creation of the first Balkan alliance that can confront Serbia. This makes European foreign policy fragmented and unstable.

Conclusion

The return of realpolitik and secret diplomacy through the war in Ukraine has the following consequences: the militarization of the

continent, political fragmentation, the weakening of the security architecture and extreme dependence on the US. Europe, instead of affirming itself as an independent actor, is sliding towards a state of permanent insecurity and secret bargaining between powers, as in the 19th century.

Regardless of the course of negotiations in the Moscow-Washington relationship over Ukraine, the lack of European realpolitik power will become increasingly apparent. The EU continues to remain in the political sphere, and especially in the military and geopolitical sphere: a dwarf of its kind.

The Europeans' Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), adopted more than 30 years ago, is proving to be nothing short of a failure.

The presence of several European heads of government at the summit on Ukraine in Washington cannot hide the fact that Europe is geopolitically secondary...?

This conclusion is very consistent and in fact is one of the most frequent criticisms made of Europe today and its ever-decreasing role.

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