

World at Crossroads: From Scenarios to Action

These short summaries and discussions address highly complex global, regional, and translocal developments occurring up to March 2025, involving numerous actors, perspectives, and nuances. They do not offer comprehensive accounts or detailed analyses, and inevitably may overlook certain events, developments, or viewpoints. Instead, their purpose is to help stakeholders critically engage with the four RESPACE scenarios, stimulating reflection, strategic foresight, and deeper exploration of transformative possibilities for collaboration. Each RESPACE scenario outlines distinct, plausible future pathways but is explicitly not predictive. Users are encouraged to continuously adapt and update these Dialogue Inputs to reflect evolving contexts and emerging understandings.

US–Russia Talks Sideline Ukraine – Transatlantic Tensions

April 2025

Summary & Context

Amidst ongoing war in Ukraine, a dramatic diplomatic shift occurred. In February 2025, Washington and Moscow opened direct peace negotiations – pointedly without Ukraine at the table. A high-level meeting in Riyadh brought US and Russian officials together to discuss ending the conflict, representing a sharp break from the prior US stance of coordinating with allies and insisting on Ukrainian consent. During these talks, Russia hardened its terms, President Trump signalled willingness to make concessions and Pete Hegseth, the US secretary of defence, called it unrealistic for Kyiv to regain all lost territory. After the meeting, Trump expressed confidence a deal was possible, even boasting on his social media platform, ‘I have the power to end this war’, while brushing aside Ukraine exclusion by saying Kyiv ‘should have entered talks much earlier’.

European leaders and Ukraine reacted with alarm. Ukrainian officials vehemently rejected any outcome decided over their heads, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz insisted that there must be no decision without Ukraine in any peace settlement. EU members felt sidelined and betrayed. A transatlantic rift suddenly emerged, as the Trump administration

appeared to prioritise a quick deal with Putin over the wishes of its European partners and Ukraine itself. NATO unity appears somewhat strained by this unilateral US approach and European governments have begun openly discussing how to ensure their security interests are protected. In parallel with these political negotiations, the Trump administration has also shown interest in the substantial mineral resources in Ukraine, revealing an economic dimension to its diplomatic approach. In late February 2025, a contentious White House meeting between Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky highlighted US intentions to secure long-term access to critical Ukrainian minerals and hydrocarbons through a proposed reconstruction investment fund. This fund, which would leverage Ukrainian resource revenues to support reconstruction efforts, raises concerns due to its lack of explicit security guarantees or commitments on continued military aid. Zelensky’s hesitation over the terms of the deal and Trump’s transactional approach further strained US–Ukrainian relations, underscoring fears in Kyiv and among its European allies that US economic interests might overshadow Ukrainian and European security needs in upcoming ceasefire talks.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The dynamics of these US –Russia negotiations evoke the Walls scenario in full force. Rather than a cooperative values-based resolution, we see power-based superpower bargaining – exactly what a Walls world entails: states using international forums for zero-sum deals and dividing up their spheres of influence. Sidelining a smaller sovereign nation (Ukraine) in deciding its fate is a hallmark of power politics that Walls anticipates. It also resonates with a fragmenting world order: the United States and Russia carving up an issue between themselves, while simultaneously undermining the multilateral system and the trust of long-term allies. The European backlash – insisting on no negotiations without Ukraine – can be read in two ways. On one hand, it is a reassertion of principles more akin to a Maze scenario (which values inclusive rule-based multilateralism). On the other, the European move to stake out its own role could foreshadow a Towers

scenario dynamic: Europe seeking greater autonomy in security decisions because the transatlantic alliance is in crisis.

Indeed, many in Europe (politicians and citizens alike) feel compelled to bolster EU defence and diplomatic capacities given a United States that is both unpredictable and inclined to go its own way. This development contrasts sharply with Bridges scenario ideals, in which civil society and moral pressure shape peace processes. Here, Ukrainian civil society and global public opinion have been largely ignored as deals were floated without them. Instead of bottom-up peace, this is top-down realpolitik. Overall, this event aligns with Walls (great power deal making, unilateralism) and has elements of Towers (regional actors reacting to great-power dominance), while challenging and even actively undermining the cooperative ethos of Maze and Bridges.

Discussion Questions

- **For Ukrainian and European Stakeholders (Activists, Civil Society):** How can Ukrainian civil society and European peace activists ensure that any peace deal truly serves long-term peace and justice for Ukrainians? What avenues do they have to voice concerns on the international stage if the United States and Russia negotiate without Ukraine? For example, lobbying European governments to hold a firm line or using global media to highlight Ukrainian perspectives. More broadly, how can citizens in NATO countries influence their leaders to either support Ukrainian conditions or push for a just peace, depending on their views, in the face of great-power dealings?
- **For Western Donors and Policymakers:** If Washington and Moscow move toward a deal, how should European policymakers react? Should they engage in the talks to insert European and Ukrainian conditions (acting as a counter-balance in negotiations)? Or should they focus on strengthening EU security autonomously in case a US–Russia détente undermines NATO unity? For which contingencies should donors plan? For example, scaling up economic aid to Ukraine if the United States reduces support as part of a deal or, conversely, preparing massive reconstruction funds if a peace is reached. And for Ukrainian officials: Is it wiser to reject any talks that exclude them or to quietly prepare a diplomatic strategy to avoid being isolated?
- **For Russian Stakeholders (Government Officials, Business Leaders and Public Opinion Shapers):** How should Russia leverage this direct negotiation with the United States to achieve a settlement that is domestically acceptable, economically beneficial and strategically secure? Given potential domestic pressures – such as public fatigue with economic hardship, demands from influential business leaders for normalised international trade and concern among security elites about NATO expansion – what considerations should shape the Russian negotiating strategy? How can Russian policymakers and opinion leaders communicate the outcome of these negotiations to Russian society in a way that addresses domestic concerns, manages public expectations and maintains internal stability, especially if concessions become necessary?

- **For the Private Sector:** Prolonged conflict versus an imposed peace: How does each possibility impact businesses and investors? If a rapid US–Russia alignment leads to sanctions easing, how might Western companies and financial institutions navigate re-entry into the Russian market amidst European objections? Conversely, if Europe resists a bad deal and the war drags on, what role can the private sector play in sustaining the Ukrainian economy or in enforcing sanctions on Russia? Are there ways businesses could support peace without appearing to chase profit? For instance, funding humanitarian projects or job creation in war-torn Ukrainian regions to stabilise them.
- **For Local Communities in Ukraine and Russia:** How are those most affected – Ukrainian families and communities near the front, as well as ordinary Russians – reacting to the prospect of a negotiated settlement? In Ukraine, do people prefer fighting on for full sovereignty or grudgingly accept a compromise to stop the bloodshed? How can local community needs (security, justice for victims, return of displaced persons) be addressed in any peace process? In Russia, could local discontent (mothers of soldiers, economic hardships) create pressure for peace from below? Would those voices even be heard in an authoritarian system? In essence: How can any high-level peace deal incorporate the voices of those who have endured the war and not simply serve the will of powerful leaders?
- **Beyond Great-Power Deals – New Peace Structures:** The fact that a conflict in Europe is being managed above the heads of the directly affected country and continent raises questions about the adequacy of current international systems. What alternative structures or processes could be imagined to handle such conflicts more inclusively and fairly? For instance, is it possible to envision a revitalised role for the UN or the OSCE, a new pan-European security conference (building on the Helsinki model), or even novel coalitions of middle powers and civil society leading peace initiatives? How could global collaboration for peace be respaced – moving beyond a cold-war style great-power bargain toward more equitable and sustainable arrangements that give all stakeholders a voice, including smaller states and non-state actors.

Explore the RESPACE scenarios here.

