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**RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS
IN DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND TERM:
BETWEEN DESIRES AND REALITY****

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

Donald Trump's initiative to restore Russian-American relations by resolving the Ukrainian crisis with partial respect for Russia's demands seemed surprising and was described as a kind of U-turn in American foreign policy. However, the question is not only what effect such U-turns in bilateral and/or international relations can have, but also whether they can be carried out without major consequences. On the one hand, the Ukrainian crisis is complex; it decisively determines continental security, and therefore, European countries are interested in resolving it. On the other hand, after four years of confrontation, trust between Russia and the collective West has been destroyed, and time is needed to restore it. This research examines the reasons and scope of Donald Trump's initiative. There is a big difference between the publicly proclaimed desire to contribute to establishing peace and improving Russian-American relations and the realities that arise from the establishment of a balance of power through confrontation.

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The paper consists of five parts. The introductory section explains the theoretical and methodological frameworks, presents the research question and hypothesis, and defines the concept of “controlled confrontation”. The second part describes the process by which an absolute breach of trust between Russia and the USA led to an escalation of the confrontation. The third part examines changes in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, and the fourth part examines how the growth of distrust and changes in doctrinal documents contributed to the misunderstanding. The last part is the concluding remarks.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Ukraine, Russia, foreign policy, peaceful solution, controlled confrontation, international order.

INTRODUCTION: THE IDEA OF “CONTROLLED CONFRONTATION” IN ANARCHIC INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In principle, bilateral relations between states can be based on two approaches: cooperation or confrontation. However, in anarchic international relations, simultaneous cooperation and confrontation are most often observed (Proroković 2018). On the one hand, states need to strengthen their positions through the creation of alliances and coalitions, the signing of agreements (to regulate relations with others), and joining international organizations, which clearly indicates a desire for cooperation. On the other hand, the very fact that international relations are anarchic actors must rely on the principle of self-help and defend their interests with all available means, which is the reason for continuous confrontations (to a certain extent and in certain ways, with “friendly states” confrontations can arise due to current issues, manifest themselves on a political level and are easier to overcome, while with “enemy states” confrontations arise due to strategic issues, can also manifest themselves in armed conflict and last a long time).

This paper examines the confrontation between Russia and the United States and the change in bilateral relations resulting from Donald Trump’s 2024 election. The time frame from 2014 is examined, and in this context, two phases of progressive deterioration of bilateral relations (until 2016 and from 2021 to 2024) and one phase of maintaining the regime of “controlled confrontation” during

Donald Trump's first term (2017–2021). The research question is: Can a regime of "controlled confrontation" be established in Donald Trump's second term? In line with this question, the research subject is the foreign policies of Donald Trump (i.e., the contours of the United States' foreign policy under the Trump administration) and Vladimir Putin (after 2022). In this regard, the definition of the term "controlled confrontation" is based on the explanation given by Joseph Biden after a telephone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping in November 2021, saying: "It seems to me that our responsibility as leaders of China and the United States is to ensure that the competition between our two countries does not escalate into conflict, whether intentionally or unintentionally. We should stick to just simple, direct competition" (Ruwitch 2021). Thus, in anarchic international relations, competition between key actors is normal and common, but it must be somehow "controlled" or "regulated", either by reciprocal measures and provisions of international law, or by agreeing on some (temporary) principles of functioning (Waltz 1979). Some minimum of trust between the two parties must exist. We can see from the example of Ukraine what happens when this competition escalates into armed conflict. Waltz states that the world political system emerges from the coexistence of states, although no state intended to participate in the formation of a structure that would have a limiting effect on itself. The system is formed and maintained by the principle of self-help applied to the actors (92). By applying the principle of self-help, the relative balance of power changes. In doing so, states try to mitigate the factors that have a limiting effect on their position. The beginning of direct communication between the United States and Russia occurs because both states try to mitigate the limiting factors that appear after the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine through direct negotiations. However, despite direct negotiations, establishing a balance of power proves to be a far more complex process, and the consequences of the previous deterioration in relations are difficult to reverse. The previous deterioration of relations between the US and Russia has changed the character of international relations, so the direct negotiations that began in the spring of 2025 are taking place in new circumstances.

The hypothesis being tested is that the ambition of the two leaders (Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump) to establish a regime of

“strategic stability” will result in an extremely uncertain outcome, even if Russian-American bilateral relations are placed under a regime of “controlled confrontation”. The research was conducted based on the theory of structural realism (and the consideration of the consequences of establishing a balance of power between great powers in an anarchic international environment), and the methods of discourse analysis (analysis of statements and messages that precede political decisions), comparative analysis, case studies, and synthesis were also used. Discourse analysis is conducted by contextualizing statements, decisions, and documents (strategies and strategic concepts) that shape the characteristics of US and Russian policies since 2022. With this goal in mind, the works of American and Russian researchers who have examined and analyzed bilateral relations between these two states since the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis are cited.

The scientific justification of the research is based on the confirmation of the theoretical patterns of structural realism, which have often been challenged and rejected in previous decades, and the social justification is in presenting the methods of establishing a balance of power (which certainly has consequences for the entire international relations and foreign and security policies of all actors, especially small states that must adapt to these consequences).

THE PROGRESSIVE DETERIORATION OF RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS: HOW THE TRUST HAS BEEN DESTROYED?

The complexity of bilateral Russian-American relations (or, earlier, Soviet-American relations) has been the subject of research for several decades (in the framework of political science, international relations theory, economics, strategic studies, etc.), practically since the end of World War II. The dynamics of relations between the two superpowers determined the character of the entire world policy during the period of bipolarity, and therefore, the interest of researchers in this topic was quite high (Merilini 1990; Vanaik 1991; Welch Larson 1997; Полюнов 2008; Sogrin 2015; Батюк 2018). Logically, in the 1990s, this topic lost its relevance as the USA became the dominant actor in international relations and disintegration processes occurred in

the (post)Soviet space, burdening Russian foreign and security policy (Filitov 2011; Naumov 2006; Bodrova 2017). Due to disintegration and all its consequences, the USA views Russia only as a regional power, an actor significant for regional security dynamics in one part of the world, but not as significant for global processes. This (at that time also underestimating) approach will be confirmed by President Barack Obama in 2014 when he said that “Russia as no more than a regional power whose actions in Ukraine are an expression of weakness rather than strength, as he restated the threat from the G7 (Group Seven) western allies and Japan that they would inflict much broader sanctions if Vladimir Putin went beyond annexation of Crimea and moved troops into eastern Ukraine” (Borger 2014).

However, despite Obama’s opinion, since the second decade of the 21st century, as the multipolar structure of the world political system took shape, researchers’ interest in monitoring and analyzing Russian-American relations has again grown precisely because Russia’s influence in international relations has grown (Cox 2000; Stent 2015; Podlesny 2007; Shakleina 2022). Without a doubt, both great powers represent poles in the global arena; they are centers of power on whose decisions global processes depend. Logically, the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar order has brought an increasing number of confrontations between the USA and Russia. The USA has tried to maintain the role of the dominant actor and prevent the establishment of a balance of power in international relations (in this context, Obama’s quoted statement should also be viewed as a refusal to accept Russia as an “equal”), while Russia’s strategic goal was (and remained) diametrically opposite. The events of the second decade of the 21st century, when joint action – largely by Russia and China – established a balance of power towards the USA (actually, towards the collective West, which, in addition to the USA, also includes European countries and several American allies in other parts of the world, such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea) represent a classic example of confirming the theory of structural realism (neorealism), and therefore the increasing number of confrontations between the USA and Russia should not be surprising.

The most significant confrontation occurred in Ukraine, after the *coup d’état* in Kiev in 2014 and the overthrow of the legally elected

President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, in a colored revolution, which was supported organizationally, politically, and especially financially by the United States and European countries (there is already extensive literature on this, and numerous claims made at the time of the colored revolution were confirmed by subsequent events) (Bensaada 2014; Карамац 2023, 39–56; Крысенко 2021, 15–29). As the interests of the United States and Russia became increasingly conflicting, the “field of confrontation” expanded, and this also holds for the interpretation of the events of 2013–2014 on the Kyiv “Euromaidan” (Shevsky 2022). Several researchers who have accepted the interpretation, which has been widely disseminated in public space (and academic circles) in Ukraine and the states of the collective West, do not agree with the previous statement about the overthrow of Yanukovich and the colored revolution. The events at “Euromaidan” (Shevsky 2022) are interpreted as “the largest series of pro-European protests in history”, “peaceful civilian protests were met with state violence” (Campbell et al. 2025, 2); or as the “Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity” (Schveda and Ho Park 2016, 85–91). “Euromaidan” was and remains a psychological issue for Ukrainians themselves, and therefore influenced the shaping of national identity (Chayinska et al. 2019, 45–65). This was a reflection of the aspiration that “Ukrainians have been building Europe from below. The previous regime’s last-minute rejection of a long-awaited association agreement with the European Union prompted citizens to take matters into their own hands, and over the course of the next three months, a new Ukraine was born” (Krapfl and von Burgsdorff 2023, 325). Iaroslav Hrytsak calls these protests a “revolution of values”, and Volodymyr Viatrovich calls them an “anti-Soviet revolt” (Hundorova 2016, 163). The above disagreements, of course, do not change the facts and, therefore, do not affect the position of the author of this paper, but are stated as an objective reality that appears in today’s research on the Ukrainian crisis, European security, and international relations.

The attempt to maintain a regime of “controlled confrontation” after 2014, which seemed to be organized by the Minsk negotiations, failed ingloriously, as there was absolutely no willingness to implement the Minsk agreements, which included constitutional changes and asymmetrical decentralization of Ukraine (with a special status and

jurisdiction for two eastern regions – Donetsk and Luhansk) (Arbatova 2022). Angela Merkel and François Hollande later admitted that the Minsk negotiations actually served to “buy time” to strengthen the military potential of the Ukrainian armed forces (while the negotiations were ongoing, Ukraine was arming itself and preparing for a “military solution” to the conflict) (Thumann 2022; Politika 2022). This entire strategy was based on the constant depletion of Russian forces and the distraction of Russian attention, with the hope that at some point this would create the prerequisites for internal destabilization in Russia or even a coup in Moscow (Domanska 2023; Kowal 2023; Palve 2025). The implementation of this strategy was progressive, upgraded by attempts to destabilize Belarus (after the 2020 presidential elections, the EU refused to recognize Alexander Lukashenko as the elected president, so the member states “proclaimed” his opponent Svetlana Tikhanovskaya as the “elected president” and “national leader” even though she officially won only 10.23% of the vote in the elections) and Kazakhstan (mass protests, which included raids on state institutions and clashes with security forces in January 2022, ended with the intervention of the CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization forces led by Russia), and included the intensification of US, NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization and EU activities in the South Caucasus and in Moldova (which will finally be confirmed in 2024 during the organization of parliamentary and/or presidential elections in Georgia and Moldova).

Also, the (latest) attempt to establish a regime of “strategic stability” through direct negotiations between Vladimir Putin and Joseph Biden (direct talks held in Geneva in June 2021, and a multi-hour video conference in December of the same year) failed ingloriously (Minzarari 2021; Stefanović and Kostić-Šulejić 2024, 89). Russia’s explicit demand concerned Ukraine’s non-admission to NATO, as the basis for any further talks. However, in everyday practice, completely different trends were again observed. “The NATO Secretary General announces the possibility of deploying nuclear weapons in Eastern European member states, the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border is deliberately heading towards escalation, the Ukrainian authorities are making new preparations for the continuation of the armed conflict in the east of the country, Biden himself is

threatening a boycott, partial or complete, of the Winter Olympics in Beijing due to human rights violations, and by this he means the situation in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet, while US congressmen are proposing a resolution that would declare Vladimir Putin illegitimate in advance, already at the moment of his candidacy for a new presidential term” (Proroković 2021).

Mutual trust, already on shaky ground and constantly questioned since the end of the Cold War, completely collapsed after the inauguration of Joseph Biden in January 2021. Just a year later, this resulted in a total escalation of the armed conflict in Ukraine. There were direct talks with Vladimir Putin, but it seems that the Biden administration was not in the mood for an agreement on “strategic stability” that would imply the acceptance of Russian terms. The American (Democratic) leadership, from Obama to Biden, sees Russia as a regional power, and respecting Russian demands would practically mean legitimizing a new status – Russia would be anticipated as a great power. The Russian leadership sees itself as a great power, and therefore, the US’s unwillingness to respect it and to confirm the strategic stability agreement in direct talks is dismissed as an understatement. Trust between the two sides practically no longer existed, and the inability to reach an agreement contributed to the escalation of the armed conflict in Ukraine.

RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 2022

Russia had to define a new foreign policy, adapted to the new conditions that characterized the armed conflict on Ukrainian soil and the conduct of an uncompromising hybrid war against the collective West. Yaakov Kedmi noted that the West’s conduct practically leaves little room for maneuver for Russia: “You are now outside the law! Your country is outside the law! Your culture! Your athletes! Your history! You are not within their jurisdiction. And you are thinking: how can we live by laws that do not apply to us! How will you live in this lawlessness? By laws that are being broken to stifle you” (Proroković 2022). Russians and Russia, as far as the West is concerned, have been excluded from the international order, global trends, and decision-making processes since February 2022. “That’s

why Dostoevsky and Tchaikovsky are being removed from the repertoire, sports clubs and national teams are being expelled from international competitions, and students are being expelled from universities. A church was robbed in Oxford, a Munich clinic was banned from entry for Russian and Belarusian patients, and offensive posters are being put up in shop windows. The hysteria continues, the madness knows no bounds, and racism is also being observed in some anti-Russian actions. Long-held stereotypes about cruel, arrogant, insensitive, and haughty Russians can today be reported as undeniable and proven facts” (Proroković 2022).

Even before 2014, Russia had been striving to obtain a kind of “recognition of great power status” from the USA and thus legitimize its position in world politics (Nedić and Mandić 2021, 139–157). Since 2014, it has been intensifying its efforts in this direction, and “in this context, confrontations serve as instruments of pressure on the other side, of proving its own power and of communicating that Russia is capable of both protecting its own interests (which directly concern national security) and of influencing global security and overall international relations. The documents of the same name, the Foreign Policy Concept of Russia, from 2013 and 2015, unequivocally emphasize that the main goal is for this country to be one of the poles in the emerging multipolar system” (Proroković 2023, 50–51). The 2015 Concept states: “The state policy in the field of national security and socio-economic development of the Russian Federation contributes to the implementation of strategic national priorities and the effective protection of national interests. A stable foundation has been created for the further expansion of the economic, political, military and spiritual potential of the Russian Federation, as well as for increasing its role in the formation of a multipolar world” (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации 2015, point 7). Two years earlier, it was declared that Russia would “work to anticipate events and lead them”, and in this regard, point 4a states that the goal is to occupy “a leading and authoritative position in the international community, as best suits the interests of the Russian Federation as one of the influential and competitive centers of the modern world” (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации 2013, 2).

However, due to the hybrid war, which includes attempts at international (political) isolation of Russia, economic sanctions, a propaganda campaign and (mis)use of all mechanisms offered to the West by certain international organizations (UN General Assembly, Council of Europe, International Criminal Court, G7, etc.), Russia has been forced to change its Foreign Policy Concept. “For the first time, the emphasis is on the fight against neo-colonial practices, which will prevent the hegemony of Western states and strengthen Russia’s position in non-Western countries. A striking example of the logic of neocolonialism is the new hybrid war in Ukraine and its political and economic consequences. Rejecting the reality of a multipolar world, the countries of the collective West give preference to a wide range of military-political instruments, bypassing universal structures, including the UN Security Council. As Aleksandr Kramarenko rightly notes, equal international cooperation prevents the West from keeping the whole world in colonial dependence” (Lebedeva and Bobrov 2023; Крамаренко 2023). Faced with “excommunication from the Western order”, the foreign policy concept also states that “it is important to note that one of the priority areas of humanitarian policy is countering Russophobia, the initiators and conductors of which are hostile foreign states” (Lebedeva and Bobrov 2023). Also, the concept of strategic planning is being introduced, based on national interests from which all goals derive (previously, strategic goals were declared the highest priorities in such documents, and the processes that should lead to their fulfillment were adjusted accordingly, and certain “instruments” were used). However, the most visible change concerns the geopolitical vector of Russian foreign policy. The previous Concepts (adopted consecutively in 2013, 2016, and 2020) also emphasized the need to improve the work of the REC – Republic Electoral Commission. Russia, India, and China, and the BRICS formats (in addition to India and China, Brazil and South Africa were also included, and from 2023, the list of members will be further expanded), and this new one explicitly lists some additional priorities of a “global nature”. Russia is turning towards broader and more intensive cooperation with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region, the Islamic world, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the “Eurasian continent”, and goals related to the Arctic, the World Ocean, and space are declared as national

interests. Ivan Timofeev calls this approach “the path to the world majority” (Timofeev 2023). Relations with the USA and Western Europe are no longer a priority; on the contrary, they are now hostile Russophobic countries, and relations with them directly depend on the strategy of their actions (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации 2023). That is, they will be based on pure reciprocity, whatever that means in practice. Excommunicated from the “Western order”, Russia has since 2022 interpreted and established its relations with the USA differently. If the USA were waging a hybrid war against Russia, the response had to be a Russian hybrid war against the USA.

In this context, Russia’s nuclear doctrine should also be viewed. It was a response to the increasingly open and extensive supply of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine by a NATO member. The revision of the nuclear doctrine in November 2024 “lowered the threshold” for the use of this type of weapon more in a rhetorical than in a substantive sense, because it could also be used in the event of a conventional attack by an enemy that poses a “critical threat” to Russia (Kalabuhov 2024). In addition, it was defined that a “joint attack” on Russia would be considered a conventional attack by any state supported by a nuclear power. This is a strategic deterrent measure directed at the Western nuclear powers (the United States, Great Britain, and France) and a warning that proxy wars against Russia (such as the one in Ukraine) will not be tolerated in the future (Blagojević 2025, 42). Therefore, in the second half of 2024, in parallel with the implementation of the new Foreign Policy Concept and preparations for updating the “Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence”, an increasing number of analyses and articles are appearing in the public space announcing the possibility of using nuclear weapons and/or the outbreak of nuclear war (Karaganov 2024; Korotchenko 2024; Medvedev 2024). Most likely, at the beginning of its military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian leadership did not think that this development of the situation would occur only two and a half years later. Negotiations with the Ukrainian side (conducted first on the territory of Belarus, and then in Istanbul), the withdrawal of military forces from certain parts of Ukraine after those negotiations (parts of the areas around Chernigov, Sumy, Kharkov and Kiev), attempts to leave open channels of communication

with Western countries, even the initial misunderstanding that, as far as the collective West is concerned, Russia remains excluded (and for which Yaakov Kedmi warned the Russian elite and the political public with a sharp statement), indicate that at that time there was a lot of confusion, misunderstanding, indecision and inability to find their way in the newly created situation, along with the assurance that a new type of confrontation (the armed conflict in Ukraine) does not mean the cessation of all types of cooperation. Since there was no cooperation (and the confrontation also extended to the freezing of Russian foreign assets abroad, the prevention of financial transactions with Russia, the brutal seizure of Russian property state and private abroad, and the destruction of Russian strategic infrastructure such as Nord Stream), over time, Russian policy (foreign and security) is being consolidated, framed on new concepts and doctrines, and based on reciprocity in relation to the collective West (one could even conclude, observing the changes in nuclear doctrine, that these are asymmetric measures, which seem very threatening to enemy states). This undoubtedly increases the conflict potential and, six decades after the Cuban Missile Crisis, once again brings the topic of nuclear war to the forefront of political debates. In the absence of trust between Russia and the United States, anarchy manifests itself in this way. It turned out that, to a certain extent, such a manifestation of anarchy also affected the American approach, influencing the formation of Donald Trump's view of the Ukrainian crisis. Several reasons influenced Trump's view of Ukraine, but one of them is certainly the possibility of a nuclear war. He did not want to go to war with Russia over Ukraine; in fact, he was not ready to damage his relations with Moscow over the Ukrainian issue (Stent 2024).

TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY AND RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

Unlike his predecessors, Trump has shown in his first term that he has no intention of pursuing a policy of continuity. His foreign policy has been unpredictable, often marked by unusual or incomprehensible decisions, grounded in the principles of deterrence, containment, and coercion (Preston 2021). In international relations,

Trump gives priority to bilateral agreements, and international organizations and conventions that he assesses are not in the interests of the United States are either sharply criticized (thereby delegitimizing them, such as the World Trade Organization), or bypassed (he treats them with disdain, making it clear that the United States comes first, which can be seen in his relationship with the EU) or withdrew from them (the Paris Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership) (Jervis 2023). Supporting Israel, Trump is withdrawing the US from the nuclear agreement with Iran, imposing new sanctions on this country, thus trying to create a different balance of power in the Middle East. Surprisingly, he meets twice with North Korean President Kim Jong Un (in February and June 2019) to initiate the topic of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and demands that NATO allies increase their military spending. Trump's unpredictability may also be a consequence of frequent resignations or replacements in key positions in his administration. During the first term, two secretaries of state, two ambassadors to the UN, two CIA directors, three secretaries of defense, four assistants for national security, etc., were replaced in the Trump administration. It is noteworthy that, halfway through his first term, Trump started a trade war with China, which will continue even after Joseph Biden takes office as president. The perception of China as the most significant challenger and greatest threat to the United States in the international arena is a characteristic of Trump's policy. It is not excluded that Trump addresses Russia differently than his predecessors, precisely because of this. From Trump's perspective, it is desirable to loosen (or, in the extreme case, break up) the Russian-Chinese partnership, thereby leaving Beijing without an important ally in balancing power (Proroković 2024, 84–94).

It is noteworthy that Trump's second term in 2025 begins with a series of unexpected decisions (introducing or increasing tariffs on goods from Canada and Mexico, opening a political front towards the EU, as manifested in Vice President Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference) and incredible statements (taking Greenland from Denmark, demanding management of the Panama Canal, demanding that Ukraine hand over its critical raw materials). The second term also begins with Trump's phone call to Russian President Vladimir Putin and the rapid organization of a bilateral meeting in Riyadh between

delegations led by the heads of diplomacy, and then a direct meeting between the two heads of state in Alaska. Now the US wants an immediate end to the armed conflict, a peace agreement, and improved relations with Russia, which is why Trump and his entourage are approaching Volodymyr Zelensky in a very undiplomatic manner (as he is otherwise inclined to do), highlighting the issue of corruption related to US donations to Ukraine in the period 2022–2025. “In a major diplomatic turnaround”, the two sides have agreed to restore their diplomatic missions in Washington and Moscow, to form a high-level team to support peace talks on Ukraine, and to explore opportunities for closer relations and economic cooperation (Lee and Litvinova 2025). If in the non-Western part of the world, Trump’s previous decisions and announcements seemed unexpected and incredible, for Americans and American allies (especially in Europe), Trump’s attitude towards Ukraine seemed absolutely shocking. Fareed Zakaria states that it represents a “stunning turn” that is “in some ways the biggest turn in American foreign policy in the last eight decades” (Zakaria 2025). Roger Köppel explains why this is happening: “The war drum against Russia, that crazy plan that defies all historical experience to defeat Russia militarily in its own backyard, is inevitably proving to be empty, historically blind and dangerous for society. Thanks to the apparent irrelevance of the Brussels Eurocrats, it is becoming clear that this conflict between Ukraine and Russia has always been, as we have written here, a proxy war between the American neoconservative war lobby and a resurgent Russia” (Köppel 2025). In addition to the assumptions made above about the causes of Trump’s attitude towards Russia, it should be added that the reasons for the change of course may also be the high costs of this proxy war (and the outcome is extremely uncertain despite the high costs), which could at one point escalate into a nuclear war, but also the fact that this war was a “geopolitical investment” of American neoconservatives (part of the Republicans gathered around the Bush family) and neoliberals (gathered around the Democratic Party), people against whom Trump launched an extensive campaign on the domestic level. It is noticeable that, unlike when he took office in 2017, Trump is starting his second term far more prepared. Even before the inauguration, he announced the appointment of key functionaries, mostly people who share his views on foreign

and security policy, and who were recruited from the first or second echelon of the Republican Party. Trump used the four years spent in opposition to select personnel and assemble a management team. Therefore, despite unexpected decisions and incredible statements (unlike his first term), there were practically no “leaks” of individuals from Trump’s environment. Not only did no one contradict him, but the newly appointed officials also wholeheartedly supported him. US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, at a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (also known as the Ramstein group) in mid-February 2025, told other participants (NATO allies and other partners) that NATO membership was “no longer an option for Ukraine”, and that politicians in Kiev must prepare for the negotiation process and abandon the idea of returning the entire territory. According to him, the members of the Ramstein group “must face reality” and abandon the “illusory goal”. He also added that most of the financial obligations and military responsibilities for the situation in Ukraine would be assumed by European countries, including the potential deployment of peacekeeping forces on the ground, but that this would not imply the protection of those forces under Article 5 of the NATO Charter. This practically means that in the event of any new escalation of the conflict between Russian and European forces in Ukraine, the United States will have no obligation to intervene. Hegseth came “to communicate directly and unequivocally that the harsh strategic realities prevent the United States from being primarily focused on the security of Europe. The United States faces serious threats to our homeland. Therefore, we must, and already are, primarily focused on the security of our own borders” (Cook and Cropp 2025).

For Trump’s foreign policy, according to these explanations, Ukraine is not a priority, but a “bottomless pit” that has “eaten up” hundreds of billions of dollars (directly or indirectly) in just three years, and this crisis has given rise to a new threat in the form of nuclear war. Considering other statements and decisions from his first term, China is a key threat to US interests in foreign policy, and Trump wants to weaken the mechanisms that maintain the balance of power in international relations by intensifying cooperation with Russia. The way he did this indicates that Trump perceives Russia as a great power, that is, the impression is gained in the entire international community

(no matter how we define this term) that Russia is equal to the US and that its demands will therefore be respected (the negotiating principles announced by Pete Hegseth are that there will be no membership for Ukraine in NATO and that there will be changes to Ukraine's borders in favor of Russia).

POINTS OF (MIS)UNDERSTANDING: THE FUTURE OF RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Of course, the establishment of direct communication after three years of no cooperation has been welcomed by Russian researchers and international relations commentators. Russia needs a peaceful solution for Ukraine, as the armed conflict has brought increased costs and expenditures for military purposes, large human losses, but also a change in circumstances both internally (terrorist acts, threats to security, attacks on infrastructure facilities) and externally (continuous confrontation with the collective West, the conduct of a hybrid war that also has its own “conventional dimension”). However, one also gets the impression that Russia does not need to “rush” to reach a peace settlement. Trust is relatively easy to lose, but difficult to regain. Although Donald Trump's policies, viewed from both an ideological and geopolitical perspective, are fundamentally different from the Biden administration's positions, Russian distrust of proposals coming from the US remains high, despite “open channels” of communication and direct talks between officials (visits by US President's envoy Steve Witkoff to Moscow and Russian President's special representative Kirill Dmitriev to Miami during the second half of 2025).

Sergei Karaganov suspects that “all talk of compromise and truce boils down to freezing the conflict along the line of engagement. This will give them time to rearm the remnants of the Ukrainian army, and, reinforcing it with troops from other countries, start a new round of hostilities. So, we will have to fight again, but this time from less advantageous political positions. If the worse comes to the worst, we can and should present such a compromise as a victory. However, this will be a quasi-victory, and, frankly speaking, the West's victory. This is how it will be seen around the world and by many in our country, too” (Karaganov 2025). Therefore, he advocates a new approach that

must be based on eliminating the causes of a possible renewal of armed conflict in the future: “If and when the Americans withdraw, Ukraine will be defeated quite quickly. Its eastern and southern regions will be handed over to Russia. The central and western parts of present-day Ukraine should become a neutral, demilitarized state with a no-fly zone above it, where everyone who does not want to be with Russia and obey its laws can come and live. A truce will be concluded. After the truce, we will have to join forces with our friends from the World Majority to address the problems facing humanity, even with the Americans, if they come to their senses at last. At the same time, it will be necessary to keep Europe from solving the world’s problems for a while, as it is once again becoming the main threat to itself and the world. Peace in Europe can only be established when its back is broken again, as we did in the past by defeating Napoleon (*Napoleon Bonaparte*) and Hitler (*Adolf Hitler*), and when the current generation of its elites changes” (Karaganov 2025).

Rostislav Ishchenko thinks similarly: “The United States wants this to be a victory over Kyiv, and Russia needs to fixate on its victory over the Collective West, which caused the Ukrainian crisis and, thanks to whose support, Ukraine has held on for so long. The United States is ready to cede any territory of Ukraine, and even all of it, but it is important for them to be recognized not as a participant in the conflict, but as a mediator. We can be flexible on the issues of borders, governments, inclusion, exclusion, and the division of territories (except for what is the constitutional territory of Russia), but we cannot allow the West to escape from facing its own, and not only Ukrainian, defeat in the current military crisis. So, the Russian position is that we can negotiate with Kyiv, but we can also beat it to the punch – as the cards fall. The West, more precisely the US, is the one we are necessarily waiting for at the negotiating table as the other side in the conflict, whose defeat we intend to ensure. Others can be present, if Washington is more comfortable with them in the company, but in principle their presence at the negotiations (and some of them on the political map as well) is not necessary” (Ishchenko 2025).

Andrew Korybko reminds us that “Russia’s two main goals in the special operation are the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine”, and it is open to how this can be realized even in agreement

with Trump: “It is unrealistic to imagine that Trump will agree to allow Russia to deploy armed forces throughout Ukraine to implement this, which means that this can only be achieved through diplomatic means, with the consent of Kiev” (Korybko 2025). In practice, this means there will be neither quick solutions nor quick implementation once solutions are established. Dmitry Suslov also writes about denazification and demilitarization, warning that “the dynamics and high pace that Trump has taken in the negotiations on Ukraine are associated not with the desire to improve relations with Russia, but with the desire to achieve a ceasefire on the battlefield as soon as possible. Not a comprehensive solution with the elimination of the root causes, but precisely a ceasefire. This interest is connected, first of all, with the desire of the United States to prevent the complete defeat of Ukraine and its transformation into ‘Trump’s personal Afghanistan’. Secondly, with the US aspiration to free forces and resources from European affairs and transfer them to the fight against China, shifting further life support of Ukraine to the Europeans” (Suslov 2025). He emphasizes that “the US interest – even under Trump – is precisely the opposite: Ukraine should remain a militarily strong state in the Western orbit, even if its further militarization would be carried out at the European expense. It will be extremely difficult and hardly possible to reach an agreement on this issue” (Suslov 2025). Suslov suggests that “accordingly, it is necessary to insist not only on formal non-entry into the alliance, but also on serious restrictions on practical cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, the EU countries, Great Britain and the USA in the military sphere – to turn post-war Ukraine into a truly neutral buffer. Without the delivery of Western weapons, without joint military exercises, without training the Armed Forces of Ukraine by Western instructors, without the delivery of intelligence information and, of course, without the deployment of any Western troops on the territory of Ukraine” (Suslov 2025). The already quoted Ishchenko even believes that even resolving the Ukrainian crisis will not help stabilize international relations: “the Ukrainian crisis is only a part of the global crisis, an important one, but not the most important one. The global crisis will not end soon. Too many forces are involved. If Ukraine, which had very limited resources, with limited military-technical and financial assistance from the West, has been waging a

full-scale war against Russia for more than three years, then it is easy to understand that the resources of Russia, China, the United States and their allies will be enough not for years, but for a decade or two of confrontation (if it does not turn into a world war, but retains the nature of local military conflicts and a comprehensive economic war)” (Ishchenko 2025). When it comes to global processes and geopolitical interests, Alexander Dugin states that “Trump intends to cut off all opportunities for China to continue on its current course. Trump sees China as the main competitor to American hegemony and has already launched a new round of economic and trade war, a characteristic of the Biden administration, though not with such intensity. Russia obviously does not pose a major threat to Trump, but China does. Therefore, the focus of American foreign policy will likely shift from Russia to China”. He also notes that Trump “is annoyed by the BRICS and is even threatening it with sanctions for abandoning the dollar in world trade, warning of retaliation for attempting to introduce some other global reserve currency. But at the same time, he himself is actively introducing a cryptocurrency economy, which, in essence, separates global finance from the monopoly on emissions. Therefore, one should pay attention not to his individual statements and gestures, and not even to Trump’s specific political steps, but to the ideological and geopolitical model that he follows” (Dugin 2025).

In addition to the Russian political public’s suspicion of the initiated process, the announcement of a Russian-American agreement reached in the manner proposed by Trump has also been met with fierce opposition and/or criticism in both the United States and Western European countries. The mildest effect is the warnings that quick solutions are unattainable and therefore calls for the American president to reconsider his position (Ryan 2024). Far more severe are the warnings that his approach to the Ukrainian crisis and relations with Russia could turn into a complete disaster (Ash 2024; Baev 2025; Caryl 2025; Kramer 2025). Robert Kagan states: “If Ukraine falls, it will be hard to spin as anything but a debacle for the United States, and for its president” (Kagan 2025). Just as there is Russian distrust of American proposals, there is also a fear in the US and Western Europe that a quick deal with Russia could turn into a disaster for NATO and the EU. Immediately after the inauguration, when the US president’s approval

rating is (as a rule) very high, the Trump administration can ignore warnings and criticism and appeal to the legitimacy that the president gained in the elections. However, as time goes on and if there is no sustainable solution, that legitimacy may wear off, meaning the impact of warnings and criticism will become increasingly widespread. Simply put, in the period from 2022–2025, circumstances changed irreversibly, and the confrontation became open and complete, taking the form of a hybrid war (with a conventional dimension in the conduct of a NATO proxy war against Russia on Ukrainian soil). Despite the initiative for a peaceful solution and direct negotiations, distrust remained and persisted.

CONCLUSION: THE PATH OF ESTABLISHING A “CONTROLLED CONFRONTATION”

Trump’s “stunning U-turn” in Ukraine (as Fareed Zakaria described it), viewed from a theoretical point of view, could represent the beginning of a “controlled confrontation” between Russia and the United States. Also, in principle, the establishment of a “controlled confrontation” is the basis for creating a regime of strategic stability between the two great powers. The American president took the initiative, established direct communication with Vladimir Putin and met with him, after which a high-level meetings of delegations was organized, put forward a proposal (through the Secretary of Defense) on the principles of resolving the Ukrainian crisis that to a certain extent respect Russia’s views (these principles are absolutely unacceptable to a large number of NATO and EU members, although it is questionable how many of the leaderships of all these countries will be ready to confront the Trump administration publicly) and essentially accepted Russia as an equal interlocutor. With this approach, Trump legitimized Russia’s status as a great power in international relations, thereby eliminating the first reason for Putin’s misunderstanding with Biden. However, it is extremely uncertain to what extent the elimination of this reason, along with Trump’s accompanying initiatives, will be sufficient to achieve a regime of strategic stability in Russian-American relations. What was the most important prerequisite for the continuation of cooperation in 2021

is not a prerequisite in 2025. After all, after the adoption of the new Foreign Policy Concept, Russia was no longer interested in the US recognizing or legitimizing its status in international relations. The balance of power was established through the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, with dramatic consequences for international relations and the positioning of key actors in world politics. Russia has defined new goals, has new allies, has identified new enemies, for it Ukraine is the most acute crisis, but it is not the only topic that is causing a confrontation with the collective West. Trust between Russia and Western actors (the USA, NATO, EU, G7) has collapsed, and little can be done about it in the short term. At the same time, Trump's initiatives are not well-received or supported in the collective West, especially among European countries. Whether and to what extent the USA will be able to participate alone in creating strategic agreements on the most important issues of international relations, without the participation of allies and the support of international organizations that the collective West has created over the past eight decades, is currently very questionable. This depends on many factors, some of which are unpredictable. In anarchic international relations, everyone looks after their own interests, relying on the principle of self-help, and therefore confrontations are possible (to a certain extent and in certain ways) even between "friendly states". By applying the principle of self-help, the relative balance of power changes. In doing so, states try to mitigate the factors that have a limiting effect on their position. The beginning of direct communication between the United States and Russia occurs because both states try to mitigate the limiting factors that appear after the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine through direct negotiations. However, despite direct negotiations, establishing a balance of power turns out to be far more complex, and the consequences of the previous deterioration in relations are difficult to correct. The previous deterioration of relations between the US and Russia has changed the character of international relations, so the direct negotiations that began in the spring of 2025 are taking place in new circumstances.

That is why the future of Russian-American relations is very uncertain, despite the American president's desire to improve them. Organizing cooperation (even with "controlled confrontation" or competition, as Biden described it) after three years of escalating

armed conflict is proving to be a very difficult task. The reason for this can be found in Rostislav Ishchenko's analysis and the new Russian demands that he is putting forward. When a new order is established through confrontation, it is expected to be established either by peace between the two conflicting parties, which, after a certain time, are unable to achieve victory, recognize each other's new status, or by the defeat of one of the parties in that confrontation. Either a new regime is established by agreement, or the winner exerts decisive influence in defining the new rules of the game, thereby determining strategic stability. In the specific situation, however, there is no peace agreement since not all countries of the collective West agree to it (European states only talk about a ceasefire or oppose Trump's initiatives), which delegitimizes the proposal to a certain extent, that is, the confrontation may continue after a period of calm or the expiration of the ceasefire, and if the confrontation continues, then some new circumstances may be created in which negotiations would take place in just a few months (situations when new circumstances on the front decisively affect reaching an agreement or when some new phases occur in international relations or the global economy that change the balance of power). The path to establishing a "controlled confrontation" is actually long (it is an ongoing process), torturous (it is fraught with many uncertainties), and unsafe (bad circumstances have arisen due to non-compliance with rules and procedures), so there is no guarantee that starting it will lead to a regime of strategic stability. Trump's initiative, seen from the perspective of reducing tensions in bilateral relations with Russia and preventing the possible outbreak of a nuclear conflict, is very significant (after all, Donald Trump was remembered as the American president who did not start a single new war in his first term), but it is not certain that it can lead to the establishment of lasting peace in Ukraine. For such a thing, it is necessary either for his idea to gain undoubted support from the US's European allies or for one of the parties to the conflict to achieve decisive progress on the front, which would actually end the confrontation with the military defeat of the other party.

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РУСКО-АМЕРИЧКИ ОДНОСИ У ДРУГОМ МАНДАТУ ДОНАЛДА ТРАМПА: ИЗМЕЂУ ЖЕЉА И РЕАЛНОСТИ**

Резиме

Иницијатива Доналда Трампа за обнављањем руско-америчких односа преко решавања Украјинске кризе уз делимично уважавање захтева Русије деловала је изненађујуће и описана је као својеврсни заокрет у америчкој спољној политици. Ипак, питање је не само какав ефекат могу произвести овакви заокрети у билатералним и/или међународним односима, него и да ли их је могуће извести без великих последица. Са једне стране Украјинска криза је комплексна, она пресудно детерминише континенталну безбедност и због тога су европске земље заинтересоване за њено решавање. Са друге стране, након четири године конфронтације уништено је поверење између Русије и колективног Запада и неопходно је време како би се оно обновило. Ово истраживање посвећено је испитивању разлога и домета иницијативе Доналда Трампа. Између јавно прокламованих жеља да се допринесе успостављању мира и поправе руско-амерички односи и реалности које настају због успостављања равнотеже снага у међународним односима кроз конфронтацију – разлика је велика. Рад се састоји из пет делова. Уводни део посвећен је објашњавању теоријског и методолошког оквира, презентовању истраживачког питања и хипотезе и дефинисању појма „контролисана конфронтација”. У другом делу описан је процес апсолутног нарушавања поверења између Русије и САД који је за последицу имао ескалацију

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конфронтације. У трећем делу приказује се промена руске Концепције спољне политике, а у четвртом како су нарастање неповерења и промене доктринарних докумената утицали на неспоразумевање. Последњи део су закључна разматрања.

Кључне речи: Доналд Трамп, Украјина, Русија, спољна политика, мировно решење, контролисана конфронтација, међународни поредак.

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