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Editor's Note

This issue of the *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review* begins at home. In an interview with **Kęstutis Budrys**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, we discuss Lithuania's key foreign policy priorities – sustained support for Ukraine, a strong and credible but firmly transatlantic NATO, a resilient Eastern neighbourhood, and closer cooperation with like-minded partners, including in the Indo-Pacific. Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs **Sigitas Mitkus**, in turn, outlines preparations for Lithuania's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2027.

These Lithuanian perspectives are situated in a wider context: the fourth year of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, and rapid shifts in defence and deterrence policy across Europe and Asia. Our aim with this issue is to provide concise, policy-relevant insights from practitioners and experts who help us understand how this more contested order is taking shape – and what it means for Lithuania and its partners.

Several contributions examine how Europe and NATO can sustain support for Ukraine while rebuilding deterrence. **Benedetta Berti** stresses the need for Europeans to assume greater responsibility for conventional defence while keeping a strong U.S. role at the core of the Alliance, and underlines that assistance to Ukraine must be timely. **Philippe Étienne** reflects on European unity and fatigue, the linkage between Ukraine's EU accession and security guarantees, and the practical meaning of "strategic sovereignty" when Washington expects more from its allies.

William Alberque looks at the erosion of the global non-proliferation regime and how Russia and China exploit arms control. He argues for a more strategic Western approach that connects deterrence, arms control, and partnerships – including with Indo-Pacific democracies – and points to concrete priorities for frontline states such as Lithuania. **Ilan Berman** considers the prospect of a long war, asking how Europe's resources, narratives, and political stamina will withstand a prolonged confrontation, and why maintaining public support is as important as supplying weapons.

Ukrainian perspectives are central in this volume. **Hennadiy Maksak**, executive director of the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", describes a society that must keep open the possibility of meaningful negotiations while preparing for a drawn-out conflict. His analysis of mobilisation, recruitment pressures, and the role of drones on the battlefield offers partners a realistic view of Ukraine's political and social constraints.

The growing interconnection between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions is reflected in contributions from Asian partners. **Tomoyuki Yoshida**, Chief Executive Director at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, explains Japan's historic defence build-up, its evolving deterrence posture, and the deepening partnership with Lithuania – from support for Ukraine to shared assessments of regional threats. In a conversation between **Lee Sungwon and Konstantinas Andrijauskas**, the tightening triangle between Russia, China, and North Korea is examined alongside its implications for South Korea–Europe relations, defence industry cooperation, cyber security, and critical infrastructure.

Lithuania's approach to "total defence" is explored in an interview with Colonel **Linas Idzelis**, Commander of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union. He shows how Lithuania is turning the concept into practice – expanding the Riflemen's Union, drawing lessons from Ukraine's experience with drones and new technologies, and creating varied pathways for citizens to contribute to national defence. His insights highlight that modern deterrence rests not only on high-end capabilities, but also on societal resilience and civic commitment.

A common thread runs through these contributions: the line between "frontline" and "rear" is disappearing. Decisions taken in Kyiv, Brussels, Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, or Vilnius increasingly shape one another. For Lithuania, this creates both risks and opportunities – to remain a leading advocate for Ukraine, to help define Europe's defence and deterrence posture, and to contribute to a broader network of democracies defending a rules-based international order.

This issue has been prepared with the support of our main partner – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania – whose backing is crucial while fully respecting the journal's editorial independence.

I invite you to read, discuss, and share the *Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review*. The debates in these pages speak directly to the choices that will shape Lithuania's foreign and security policy in the coming years.

Sincerely,
Linas Kojala
Editor-in-Chief,
Lithuanian Foreign Policy Review

Lithuania on the Front Line. Conversation with Foreign Minister Budrys

In his first year as Lithuania's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kęstutis Budrys frames the country's diplomacy around three pillars – national security at NATO's eastern flank, long-term support for Ukraine, and a more capable European Union. In this conversation with Linas Kojala, he explains why 0.25% of GDP for Kyiv is only a baseline, what a permanent German brigade and NATO's 5% pledge mean in practice, how Nordic–Baltic cooperation and the transatlantic bond must evolve, and why there can be no illusions about Minsk or Moscow as Lithuania looks ahead to its 2027 EU Council presidency.

Linas Kojala: *You took office as Minister a year ago. Looking back, what have been your main priorities during this period?*

Kęstutis Budrys: It is evident that the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs involves a vast array of responsibilities and the necessity to confront immediate challenges and complexities in multiple areas. Nevertheless, should I summarize the main objectives into three key areas, they would be safeguarding Lithuania's national security in a challenging geopolitical environment, affirming NATO's role as the foundation of transatlantic security, and garnering steadfast support for Ukraine, which today is the first line of defence against Russian aggression. At the same time, my particular responsibility is to ensure that Lithuania's voice in Europe continues to be strong, pushing forward collective defence priorities, deepening EU–NATO cooperation, and ensuring Lithuania's role in shaping European security policy. Strengthening strategic partnerships with the United States, Germany, Poland and our Nordic–Baltic neighbours are vital for all these tasks.

Linas Kojala: *Lithuania is among the leading European countries in supporting Ukraine, exceeding the target of 0.25% of GDP per year. Yet there are still doubts about Europe's long-term commitment to Ukraine. How do you view these discussions?*

Kęstutis Budrys: I can assure you that Lithuania will not tire in its support for Ukraine. Our commitment of 0.25% of GDP is at least for the upcoming decade. We understand very clearly that today Ukraine is the first line of defence against Russian aggression. This aggression is directed not only at Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, but also at the security of Europe as a whole. Russia made it more than clear that its primary aim is to weaken NATO and restore its spheres of influence. Thinking that Russia would stop after defeating Ukraine would be dangerously naïve.

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Minister of Foreign Affairs Kęstutis Budrys with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in November 2025. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania.

Thinking that Russia would stop after defeating Ukraine would be dangerously naïve.

Some countries in Europe may feel that distance from Russia makes them more secure from Russian threats than frontline states. But this is a false sense of security – Russia's goals go far beyond Ukraine, and we already see Russian hybrid activities on European soil, testing our resilience and resolve to respond.

Europe has provided significant financial and military support to Ukraine so far. It is natural that questions arise about how long this support will be needed, especially as domestic issues overwhelm national agendas in democratic cycles. But we must remind ourselves: even if there is a ceasefire or some form of peace deal, the entire European security architecture will continue to depend on a strong Ukraine. That means a Ukraine with 800,000 well-equipped armed forces, with stable institutions, and with social cohesion intact, anchored firmly in the EU.

Therefore, any debates on supporting Ukraine must entail planning for long-term military and financial support. It is a duty and responsibility of politicians to explain that to societies and to mobilise the necessary political will, especially when the instruments are already available. We should use NATO's PURL program for urgent military assistance; the EU's SAFE for strengthening Ukraine's defence industry and integrating it into European supply chains; a reparation loan, based on Russian frozen assets, for long-term financial support. And finally, we must begin accession negotiations. Both the EU and Ukraine must work seriously to make Ukraine a member of the European Union by 2030.

Kęstutis Budrys in Brussels, as Lithuania backs stronger EU cooperation on defence.
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania.

Last but not least – there is no greater security guarantee for Ukraine and Europe than Ukraine's membership in NATO – this objective must remain on the table.

Linas Kojala: *There have been many concerns about the future of the transatlantic relationship. Even if President Trump reaffirms his commitment to NATO, how would you assess the broader U.S.–Europe relationship, and the Lithuania–U.S. partnership in particular? What should be done next year to make it stronger?*

Kęstutis Budrys: The transatlantic relationship remains the foundation of our collective security and the backbone of NATO's strength. While certain political dynamics on either side of the Atlantic may sometimes cause uncertainty, I am confident that the strategic bond between Europe and the United States will remain strong. It is built not just on shared interests, but on common values and a deep sense of solidarity that has stood the test of time.

For Lithuania, the partnership with the United States is vital and continues to grow. American troops on Lithuanian soil, joint exercises, close cooperation in defence, economy, and energy security clearly demonstrate that this relationship is real and tangible.

The presence of U.S. troops in Europe remains essential. With upcoming adjustments to U.S. deployments, Europe must redouble its efforts to build robust defence capabilities.

On the other hand, it is encouraging that Europe is waking up and taking greater responsibility for its own security. The NATO agreement in The Hague to increase defence spending to 5% of GDP by 2035 was a big step forward. However, we no longer have 10 years to prepare. We must act as quickly and effectively as possible – strengthen Europe's military capabilities, invest in Ukraine's defence industry, improve EU–

Looking ahead, we should focus on keeping the U.S. engaged in Europe. This means more cooperation in defence industry projects, expanding transatlantic trade and investment, and maintaining active political dialogue at all levels – from governments and parliaments to private sector and civil society.

NATO coordination, and be a reliable partner for the United States.

Looking ahead, we should focus on keeping the U.S. engaged in Europe. This means more cooperation in defence industry projects, expanding transatlantic trade and investment, and maintaining active political dialogue at all levels – from governments and parliaments to private sector and civil society.

The transatlantic bond is not something we can take for granted. It requires continuous effort and investment from both sides. Lithuania will continue to be a strong advocate for a close and united transatlantic community, because we know – our security and our future depend on it.

Linas Kojala: *Germany is preparing to deploy a brigade to Lithuania – about 5,000 troops and their families – for a permanent presence. The project is expected to be completed by the end of 2027. How is the process progressing? What are the main challenges?*

Kęstutis Budrys: The deployment of Germany's 45th Armoured Brigade to Lithuania is a historic step for both our nations and for NATO's forward defence posture. It shows much-needed leadership and determination to take more responsibility for European security.

The preparations are ongoing according to plan; Lithuanian institutions are in constant and close coordination with our German partners. Both sides are fully committed to ensuring that the brigade reaches its full operational capability by the end of 2027.

This is an ambitious, complex and multi-layered project. It requires not only military planning, but also the rapid development of infrastructure and support systems for service members and their families. We are working intensively to make sure that Lithuania provides everything that is needed – the military facilities, training areas, educational institutions and overall host-nation support.

Naturally, there are challenges, which are mainly related to construction timelines and coordination among different institutions, but they are being managed efficiently. What matters most is that the political and strategic commitment is clear and firm on both sides.

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Once the German brigade is fully in place, it will mark a fundamental shift: Lithuania will host a permanently stationed Allied force of significant scale, demonstrating NATO's readiness and the strength of the transatlantic bond in very practical terms.

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Linas Kojala: *Beyond the brigade deployment, what else binds Lithuania and Germany? Which areas do you see as offering the most potential for future cooperation?*

Kęstutis Budrys: From a security perspective, Lithuania and Germany are connected by much more than the deployment of the German brigade. A particularly significant example is our growing defence-industrial cooperation. In November, construction began in Lithuania on a production facility by the German defence company Rheinmetall, which will manufacture 155 mm artillery ammunition. By far, this marks the largest defence investment in the country's history. It is more than an industrial project – it signals the "Zeitenwende", strengthens our deterrence and deepens partnership between Lithuania and Germany.

Also, we are firmly committed to expanding cooperation with Germany across politics, business, science, education, and culture. A good example of this is a Lithuanian Season in Germany, which could further enrich and deepen our bilateral relationship. We also place great value on cooperation at the societal level, including partnerships between twin towns as well as the role of civil society and NGOs. Lithuania seeks to strengthen ties not only with federal institutions, but also with German federal states (Bundesländer). In this respect, the establishment of the Consulate General of the Republic of Lithuania in Munich is expected to further advance bilateral economic, political, and cultural cooperation. Germany is also one of Lithuania's main economic partners and remains the largest foreign investor in the country, and this economic dimension could offer significant potential for further expansion.

At the same time, the potential for future cooperation is far from exhausted. Promising avenues include further defence-industrial collaboration, strengthening resilience against hybrid and cyber threats, and cooperation in the fields of energy security and military mobility. What matters most now is translating shared commitments into concrete, practical outcomes – building a partnership that delivers real capabilities, not just statements.

Linas Kojala: *Nordic–Baltic cooperation is one of the pillars of regional security, as well as economic and energy collaboration. What are the main advantages of this partnership? Do the countries speak with one voice? What more should be done to strengthen it?*

Kęstutis Budrys: The Nordic–Baltic cooperation began as Nordic support for the Baltic States in building their newly regained independence. Over the past 25 years, this cooperation has evolved into a genuine partnership of equals and has become a benchmark for effective regional coordination. The main advantage of this partnership is our ability to act quickly and in a coordinated manner – to share information, reinforce one another politically and militarily, and respond to emerging challenges with unity and determination. This significantly strengthens our shared security.

The recent accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has further reinforced this cooperation. With all Nordic countries now part of the Alliance, the Baltic Sea region has effectively become a NATO stronghold, significantly enhancing deterrence and responsiveness.

NB8 is united by shared values, common interests, and common responsibilities, which are leadership in support of Ukraine, security of the Baltic Sea region, protection of the EU/NATO external border, being the first to counter Russia's hybrid attacks, including the shadow fleet, and working together to harmonize the implementation of sanctions. No country can defend itself in isolation. That is why we must continue to deepen our Nordic–Baltic partnership. We must focus on strengthening deterrence, improving interoperability, countering hybrid threats, and creating strategic dilemmas for a potential aggressor.

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In essence, our goal is not only to speak with one voice, but to act together in a way that meaningfully strengthens the security of our region and the Alliance as a whole. But we are also interested in the NB8 regional format bringing our countries together not only in foreign affairs and defence, but also in other areas such as the economy, education, healthcare, etc.

Linas Kojala: *Many initiatives are underway to strengthen NATO's eastern flank – from the so-called "drone wall" to on-the-ground fortifications.*

Kęstutis Budrys at a Nordic–Baltic meeting, as regional cooperation remains a cornerstone of Lithuania's foreign policy. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania.

How is cooperation with our neighbours – Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and the Nordic countries – developing in this regard? Can we deliver integrated regional solutions rather than acting separately?

Kęstutis Budrys: The eastern flank remains the most exposed to threats coming from our aggressive neighbours, which makes its reinforcement both natural and necessary. The level of escalation from Russia and Belarus continues to grow. We have observed numerous examples – from military-grade drones and fighter jets violating our airspace, to sabotage, disinformation, cyber incidents and other hybrid attacks. We cannot change our geography, but what we can do is strengthen our resilience and deterrence, so that when/if the time comes, we are ready.

There are three important elements to this. First, boosting national defence spending, as agreed at the NATO Summit in The Hague. Second, our actions at the EU level. And third, NATO. All these avenues are deeply interconnected – higher national defence spending brings funding, which, together with EU instruments and NATO regional plans, is transformed into real defence capabilities. In the end, both the EU and NATO become stronger.

At the EU level, we already have a plan, which was approved by the European Council in October – to strengthen our joint defence readiness by working together on priority capability areas, with concrete projects to be launched in the first half of 2026. This includes two key initiatives for our region – the Eastern Flank Watch and the European Drone Defence Initiative. Once operational, they will complement our national initiatives such as the Baltic Defence Line and Eastern Shield, developed together with the other two Baltic states and Poland. In short, cooperation with Poland, Latvia, Estonia and the Nordic

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countries is not only ongoing, but also becoming more coordinated and capability-driven. We are moving from separate national projects to integrated regional solutions. It is important that all initiatives are designed to work together, aligning our approaches and reinforcing each other. The goal is clear: not parallel efforts, but a connected, mutually strengthening regional defence architecture.

At the NATO level, two enhanced vigilance activities are successfully ongoing since 2025 – Baltic Sentry, increasing critical infrastructure security in the Baltic Sea, and Eastern Sentry, enhancing NATO's presence along its eastern flank. I don't think it is a coincidence that disruption of undersea cables and incursions by drones into NATO airspace has ceased for the moment.

These concrete examples show that joint work and close cooperation are already well underway at the national, EU and NATO levels.

Linas Kojala: *The United States is exploring limited engagement with the Lukashenko regime in Belarus. What is Lithuania's position on this? And what role do Belarusian civil society and the opposition play in Lithuania today?*

Kęstutis Budrys: Lithuania is closely following the United States' considerations regarding possible limited engagement with the Belarusian regime and supports their goal to make Lukashenka release the political prisoners. While we acknowledge that international diplomacy sometimes requires flexible approaches, we firmly believe that any contact with the authorities in Belarus must be guided by clear principles and conditions. We once again are witnessing another Lukashenka charm-offensive round, but since we saw it in the past, we remain sceptical – his modus operandi does not change.

In addition to all hybrid attacks against neighbouring countries, including intentional smuggling using meteorological balloons that violates our airspace and halts air traffic, the Lukashenka regime continues to systematically violate human rights, restrict civil liberties, and act as an instrument of Russia's aggression. Therefore, any engagement should be explicitly linked to tangible progress – such as improvements in the human rights situation, strengthening of the rule of law, and the release of all political prisoners.

A few recent releases do not signal real change. Without structural reforms, each release simply makes room for new political prisoners. By easing sanctions without such preconditions, we will have nothing left to pressure Lukashenka to ease pressure on his own people, to stop harassing us with hybrid activities, and to cease helping Russia in its war against Ukraine.

Lithuania has consistently supported Belarusian civil society and the democratic opposition. Their presence in Lithuania is not only solidarity – it is an investment in the future of a democratic Belarus. We believe that the European Union and the international community must continue to support them as the true representatives of Belarusian society, ensuring that their voices remain central in any international dialogue concerning Belarus.

Linas Kojala: *Churchill once said that "crisis should not be wasted as an opportunity." The European Union is facing headwinds but also momentum for reform. What are Lithuania's*

priorities going forward? Which EU-level decisions or reforms would you most like to see?

Kęstutis Budrys: The European Union is indeed facing headwinds, especially for its security. There are other important challenges of global competitiveness, demography and innovation.

In this context, I would like to make four points:

First, the EU needs to do more on security and defence. We welcome recent initiatives on this, including by the European Commission on the EU's Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030. We need to reinvigorate the European defence industry, pool necessary resources, work closely with Ukraine and other like-minded countries. Also, we must invest in priority defence capabilities, military mobility, protection of critical infrastructure, especially on the EU eastern flank, bordering aggressor states. Of course, it is important to co-ordinate closely with NATO. This will be a major contribution to our security and deterrence.

Second, EU enlargement is the most powerful EU policy for promoting positive change in the neighbourhood and strengthening the Union's global role. Enlargement is the best investment in the security and prosperity of Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkans and the EU itself. Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, the country's swift integration into the EU has become even more pressing – as I said before, for the sake of European security, we need a strong Ukraine, with stable

Lithuania has consistently supported Belarusian civil society and the democratic opposition. Their presence in Lithuania is not only solidarity – it is an investment in the future of a democratic Belarus.

institutions, anchored firmly within the EU. The European Commission's assessment shows that Ukraine is making significant progress on reforms, even under conditions of war, and therefore has the potential to become an EU member by 2030. Lithuania has always been a staunch supporter of unanimity in EU common foreign and security policy, but having witnessed how some EU member states misuse their vote for purely national interests and systematically disrupt EU unity, we are open to explore ways to make the processes work. The EU enlargement is the first area to explore possibilities of QMV.

Third, Europe needs to mobilize to secure its long-term competitiveness, together with putting more efforts to ensure economic security, eradicating vulnerabilities in strategic sectors and investing in safety of supply chains. We see the untapped potential of the EU single market. We must make good use of it by removing remaining barriers, notably in the services sector, cutting red tape and pushing legislative simplification. It is also critical to create favourable conditions for research and innovation, technological advancement and start-ups.

Fourth, we have now entered strategic discussion on the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework. The outcome of this debate will set the direction of EU development for the long term. Therefore, we need a budget that addresses overlapping challenges in security and economy. Adequate financing of defence and competitiveness, including cohesion and CAP, contributes to strengthening the EU's global role and strategic resilience.

These previously mentioned points also reflect Lithuania's priorities for its upcoming Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2027. Our main focus will be to strengthen support for Ukraine and European security, advance EU enlargement, including a good progress on the finalisation of negotiations with Ukraine, boost Europe's defence industrial capacity, and enhance the Union's economic competitiveness. In addition, we will place emphasis on reinforcing internal security, managing migration and countering disinformation, while also strengthening social resilience and addressing demographic challenges. And of course, the next EU budget must reflect these priorities. If we want Europe to remain secure, prosperous, and influential, we need to align our political ambitions with real resources and practical action.

"Europe Must Lead, Ukraine Must Endure": An Interview with Benedetta Berti on NATO's Priorities, Industry, and the Transatlantic Ties

As Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine grinds on, NATO governments face twin imperatives: help Kyiv today and shape a security order that deters aggression tomorrow. Benedetta Berti, Secretary General of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, argues that the stakes extend far beyond Europe's borders – to the credibility of the rules-based order and the message sent to other authoritarian actors.

In this conversation with Linas Kojala, she outlines why Allies must maintain military aid at a high level, "at speed, at scale," how defence-industrial cooperation with Ukraine can strengthen European and transatlantic security, and what a recalibrated transatlantic bargain should look like: a strong U.S. commitment within a NATO where European Allies and Canada lead on conventional deterrence and defence.

Linas Kojala: *From your perspective, what are the stakes of Russia's war against Ukraine, and how do you see NATO's role in supporting a just and lasting peace?*

Benedetta Berti: Russia is not just an existential threat for Ukraine, but it was also really part of a larger vision to redraw the rules of European security, to redraw borders and to re-establish spheres of influence aided and abetted by countries like North Korea, Iran and the People's Republic of China. So I think from the beginning it was clear what the stakes were and also there was an impact not just for regional and European security but also for global security and for the rules-based international order. I believe that point of view remains strong.

I believe that we continue to see that the stakes are incredibly high and that's why all NATO allies support a long-lasting and just peace in Ukraine – and that means a peace that ensures that Ukraine is a sovereign, free and secure country; that ensures that aggression is not rewarded, because that would also send very worrisome signals to other authoritarian competitors and adversaries and have a very direct negative impact on the international rules-based order.

... we continue to see that the stakes are incredibly high and that's why all NATO allies support a long-lasting and just peace in Ukraine – and that means a peace that ensures that Ukraine is a sovereign, free and secure country; that ensures that aggression is not rewarded, because that would also send very worrisome signals to other authoritarian competitors and adversaries and have a very direct negative impact on the international rules-based order.

From the NATO perspective, there has been a clear, immediate focus on providing assistance to Ukraine here and now. The situation

Benedetta Berti, who became NATO's youngest director of policy planning after a career in academia and think-tanks. NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

on the battlefield remains complicated; Russia's aggression has continued to escalate and continues to target Ukrainian civil infrastructure and civilians as part of its broader strategy to try to cripple Ukraine's will to fight. But this strategy is failing because Ukraine remains steadfast in its ability to respond to aggression.

The first priority has been to provide the military support that Ukraine needs to fight this war and defend itself. NATO allies continue to provide roughly 99 percent of all military assistance to Ukraine, meaning that more than the vast majority comes from NATO allies.

In 2024, 50 billion euros were mobilized in military assistance to Ukraine, 60 percent of which came from European countries and Canada – also showing that Europeans are doing more in a context of shifting burden-sharing between our American friends and Europeans, where Europeans are taking more responsibility for the conventional deterrence and defence of Europe and for European security writ large.

In the first half of 2025, we added over $35 billion again for security and defence cooperation to Ukraine. Now NATO is focusing on the PURL (Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List); more than 2 billion euros have already been mobilised. This is a crucial mechanism to ensure that urgently needed equipment is purchased from the United States and delivered to Ukraine

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at speed and scale, enabling them to remain in the fight.

NATO also has its own mechanism, which involves security assistance and training for Ukraine. This mechanism

works in conjunction with PURL, ensuring coordination between the assistance provided by all allies to support Ukraine at scale, speed, and with what it needs.

Another aspect is the support for political measures aimed at putting pressure on Russia to dry up its sources of support for the war. That's why there has been support for sanctions; the shadow fleet, for instance, an important source of income that should be absolutely targeted in my view. And then, of course, also looking at how to dry up the coffers of Putin's war machine and the support he receives from third parties outside the Euro-Atlantic area, including China.

The second priority, in addition to supporting Ukraine today, is to look to the future – how we can contribute to ensuring that there is a modern, effective, and agile Ukrainian defence force that will be able to continue to deter and defend the country the day after a political settlement. This is more of a long-term transformation of the Ukrainian armed forces, enhancing interoperability with NATO standards and improving its own effectiveness and agility.

However, I must be very clear: it's a two-way street. Ukraine is teaching us as much as we are teaching them; this is a real partnership. When NATO countries work with Ukraine's industry and innovation ecosystem, the benefits go beyond Ukraine's own defense – they also strengthen our forces and our security. Ukraine's defense-industrial base is among the most effective in Europe. It truly runs both ways. That's another priority: not only securing a just, long-lasting peace today, but also preparing for the day after a political settlement, so Ukraine can deter and defend itself. This is the second – and equally important – line of effort from a NATO perspective.

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte. Office of the President of Ukraine.

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Linas Kojala: *You mentioned the defence industry. Do you see under-explored opportunities where the business community can bring agility and know-how to help governments and NATO respond to the changing nature of war?*

Meeting of the NATO–Russia Council (NRC) in 2013.
NATO.

If you look at NATO allies' relations with the Russian Federation after the end of the Cold War, you can really see – especially in the 90s – that there was a concerted effort to bring Russia much closer to us from a political dialogue perspective and from practical cooperation.

Benedetta Berti: NATO and Ukraine set up actually a joint training and lessons-learned centre, JATEC, in Poland, where these conversations are happening daily. There are a lot of exchanges at the civil and military level, and of course also around defence-industrial cooperation.

NATO is undertaking the largest reinforcement of our collective defence in generations. That brings many challenges. One is sustaining higher defence spending – and we are doing so. At the last NATO summit, allies backed a plan to move toward spending five percent of GDP on defence: 3.5 percent for core defence requirements and 1.5 percent for security-related expenses.

However, the key point is to convert additional capital into the capabilities our militaries require to enhance output. We also require a much stronger defence-industrial base on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly in Europe. There are real opportunities to work with our Ukrainian friends. Over the past few years they have shown what an innovative, cutting-edge, responsive defence-industrial ecosystem looks like – procurement, integration of new technologies into equipment, and fielding that equipment at speed.

There is so much we can learn from our Ukrainian counterparts. Looking ahead, there is a huge opportunity to increase and strengthen defence cooperation. This is not only beneficial for Ukraine's security; it is equally advantageous for European and NATO security, as we would be learning – especially on issues like drone warfare – from the best. It is essential to view this cooperation not as a one-way street, but as a partnership that strengthens us all.

Linas Kojala: *There's a recurring argument – especially outside the Euro-Atlantic area – that the West should have brought Russia fully into Europe's security architecture, even NATO. Would that have solved today's problems?*

Benedetta Berti: If you look at NATO allies' relations with the Russian Federation after the end of the Cold War, you can really see – especially in the 90s – that there was a concerted effort to bring Russia much closer to us from a political dialogue perspective and from practical cooperation.

Indeed, a special political body, the NATO-Russia Council, was created in 2002. There were countless exchanges at the political level; political dialogue; practical cooperation on counterterrorism. In other words, the policy point I'm making: NATO did extend a very open door to political engagement and strengthening the relationship with Russia.

We did that at a time in which, of course, there was the hope that in the post-Cold War security arrangement we could all agree to abide by the same principles: respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty, and refraining from the use or threat of force. We all agreed on the same principles. On that basis, we started to build a constructive, security-based relationship.

Yet Russia changed its mind over what it wanted from the post-Cold War security order. President Putin made it very clear as early as 2007 at the Munich Security Conference. If you don't want to listen to the words, listen to the deeds: the war in Georgia in 2008; the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. They told us they didn't believe the post-Cold War architecture, based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the defence of each country, worked for Russia.

What Putin wanted was the redrawing of borders and the re-establishment of spheres of influence, returning to a world in which Russia could control, directly or indirectly, its neighbours and not respect their free and sovereign choices, including their foreign policy.

Clearly, that's not a position compliant with international law, the UN Charter, or compatible with our desire to live in a continent that is stable and peaceful, with each country free to conduct its foreign policy, make its own alliances, and have its sovereignty fully respected.

So, we changed our relationship in response to the change in behaviour from the Russian Federation, and that was a gradual process. After 2014, we established a no-business-as-usual policy with respect to Russia after its illegal annexation of Crimea, whereby we stopped all practical cooperation but continued with dialogue, thinking that maybe through dialogue we would resolve our differences and return to compliance with international law.

It didn't work. To the contrary – this is my personal opinion, not an official one – I think our attempt to appease led us to a security situation where we are now less secure, and where President Putin mistook our attempt to find a resolution for weakness and escalated with a full-fledged war of aggression that started in 2022.

It's essential to have these conversations, but we need to examine the facts. Russia wasn't interested in joining NATO *per se*, but became a partner of NATO. We tried to build bridges and establish a constructive relationship. But it's very difficult to have a constructive relationship with a country that uses force to alter its territory, to annex its neighbour's territory, and to wage wars of aggression.

In the future, if Russia fundamentally changes its course, then we will have a conversation accordingly. However, the best way to have that conversation is first to ensure that the war ends with a just and lasting peace, where Ukraine is sovereign, secure, prosperous, and independent.

It's essential to have these conversations, but we need to examine the facts. Russia wasn't interested in joining NATO per se, but became a partner of NATO. We tried to build bridges and establish a constructive relationship. But it's very difficult to have a constructive relationship with a country that uses force to alter its territory, to annex its neighbour's territory, and to wage wars of aggression.

Linas Kojala: *Finally, there's anxiety about the state of transatlantic ties, debates about U.S. commitment to NATO. How do you see the way forward?*

Benedetta Berti: Yes, there are changes. We know that there is a changing course in the nature of the transatlantic bargain, quote unquote. The result must be that, within a strong transatlantic framework – with a strong U.S. commitment to European security, to Article 5, and to extended nuclear deterrence – there still needs to be a shift.

That shift needs to ensure the Europeans take a primary role for the conventional deterrence and defence of Europe and of our territory over time. So that's a shift in the burden, so to speak, where we have a Europe-led NATO.

'We Are at War Whether We Admit It or Not': William Alberque on Non-Proliferation, NATO's Deterrence, and Lithuania's Next Move

William Alberque argues that the global non-proliferation system has not collapsed – but that the West is dangerously naïve in how it plays the game. The former NATO official and leading arms control expert warns that Russia and China are "gaming" the very institutions designed to constrain the spread of weapons of mass destruction, from the UN to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and beyond – while deepening military ties with regimes such as Iran and North Korea. In his view, simply defending the status quo and opposing all proliferation in absolutist terms is no longer sufficient; the West must learn to use the rules, institutions, and partnerships more strategically to strengthen allies and penalize adversaries, without abandoning its core principles.

In this conversation with **Linas Kojala**, Alberque dissects the shifting landscape of nuclear deterrence – from Seoul and Tokyo's growing doubts, to Riyadh's hedging, to Donald Trump's evolving instincts on arms control and testing. He explains how NATO's new standing defense plans and the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) concept have finally begun to close the gap between military reality and political rhetoric, while exposing persistent capability shortfalls, fragile political cohesion, and unresolved questions over who authorizes the first move in a crisis.

For Alberque, Russia's long-running hybrid campaign and China's calibrated pressure amount not to "grey zone" ambiguity, but to war by other means – demands for clarity that countries like Lithuania, he argues, can answer not only with more troops and hardware, but with people, concepts, and new partnerships, especially with South Korea, Australia, and Japan.

Linas Kojala: *How would you describe the current state of the global non-proliferation regime? Would you characterize it as fractured, adapting, or fundamentally collapsing?*

William Alberque: The non-proliferation regime is still something we should be investing in. It is in our interests to continue to support it. A completely uncontrollable situation in terms of nuclear proliferation is certainly not in our interest.

But we should think more strategically. We have to be much more mindful that Russia and China are gaming the systems of arms control, non-proliferation, and risk reduction really, really hard these days.

Expectations that the United States, the UK, France, Russia and China – the Nuclear Weapon States as defined by the NPT, and the permanent members of the UN Security Council – could find ways to cooperate on the most important security threats, such as nuclear non-proliferation, are hugely diminished.

For instance, the 2024 Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and North Korea includes

William Alberque, former director of NATO's Arms Control, Disarmament, and WMD Non-Proliferation Centre (ACDC). LRT.

We have to ask some really hard questions for ourselves. Are there ways that we can use this system more effectively for our own interests while remaining within the rules? If, for instance, South Korea decides to go nuclear, is that something we simply oppose outright, or is that a debate we at least need to have in terms of our longer-term interests?

provisions on mutual assistance and political coordination, including in international organizations – effectively signaling that Russia will defend North Korea's interests in bodies such as the UN and the IAEA. So how do we continue to support the non-proliferation regime while understanding that Russia and China are shielding proliferators for their own narrow self-interests?

We have to ask some really hard questions for ourselves. Are there ways that we can use this system more effectively for our own interests while remaining within the rules? If, for instance, South Korea decides to go nuclear, is that something we simply oppose outright, or is that a debate we at least need to have in terms of our longer-term interests? I'm not saying we should help South Korea acquire nuclear weapons – but we are going to have to look at the system and our role in the system with a broader view, because Russia and China already are seeking to use the system against us and accountability for countries like Iran and North Korea. China is very openly using the non-proliferation regime and UN bodies to advance its interests, walking away from the rule-based order we created, and seeking to coerce countries to support its positions.

So just supporting the regime blindly – saying we must preserve everything exactly as it is and oppose all proliferation in all circumstances – is no longer enough. We need a more sophisticated approach to counter Russia's and China's moves, and to look at ways to strengthen our friends and disadvantage our adversaries through the very rules they exploit.

Linas Kojala: *So do you think that South Korea and Japan are the countries to watch if the Western world revisits some of its previous assumptions in this area?*

William Alberque: South Korea wants and needs more deterrence against North Korea. Anything we can do to strengthen South Korea in the longer term also increases deterrence vis-à-vis China and Russia, which is good.

South Korea is also the country among our close partners where there is the most public support for options "in the nuclear space" – whether that's the return of U.S. nuclear weapons to the peninsula or, in a more distant scenario, a domestic

Former U.S. President Donald Trump at a public event. Gage Skidmore.

capability. They have clearly said to the United States: we need more deterrence. Washington responded with the Washington Declaration in April 2023 and the creation of the Nuclear Consultative Group to deepen consultations on nuclear and strategic issues. That helped, but the pressure from parts of South Korean politics and public opinion to see U.S. nuclear weapons back on the peninsula remains strong.

I want to reiterate that helping South Korea build its own bomb would be wrong. But there are many things we can do short of that – stronger conventional capabilities, tighter consultation, visible reassurance. Because if South Korea were to go nuclear, pressure on Japan would spike. Taiwan would also look at it and ask: why not us?

There are other aspects also. South Korea's support to Poland on conventional arms is enormously in our favor. South Korean development of sophisticated missiles can seriously help and turbocharge European efforts. Europeans should be looking at South Korea much more closely.

Remember: South Korea has developed very sophisticated conventional counterforce options against a nuclear-armed foe (such as the "Kill Chain," "Korean Integrated Air and Missile Defense," and "Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation"). They have tactics, technologies, and techniques aimed at defeating such an adversary. There is a lot NATO allies can learn from South Korea – and a lot they can gain by cooperation with us.

Japan, too, is looking at better hypersonic missiles and deep-strike options. On the conventional side, we need to encourage and work really closely with Japan and South Korea. Their interests are remarkably aligned with those of the United States and Europe. Russia is putting Japan under serious military pressure with air and naval activities, just as it pressures Lithuania and others. So there is real scope for cooperation.

You also have to look at the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has been hedging – investing in enrichment options that are civilian on paper but clearly

preserve a weapons potential. They say openly this is about ensuring deterrence and leverage with Washington. Then you have occasional, more ambiguous statements from Turkey. I don't overreact to every line from Ankara, but you always have to keep an eye on President Erdoğan.

Linas Kojala: *President Trump has suggested that the United States might consider resuming nuclear testing. Beyond the headlines, how do you interpret that? What strategic message is he trying to send?*

William Alberque: Trump's engagement on nuclear issues has always been interesting. During election campaigns, he talked about nuclear arms control, about wanting to replace New START with a "bigger, better" treaty. At the same time, like every U.S. president, he learned that the Russians are extraordinarily difficult to deal with seriously on arms control.

People mythologize a golden era of U.S.–Russia cooperation in the 1990s – Boris Yeltsin as a democrat. It's nonsense. Yeltsin was vehemently anti-NATO on key issues, pursued the war in Chechnya, and built the centralized system he handed to Putin. Every U.S. president – Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama – has tried to "do business" with Moscow and run into structural reality.

Trump also tried. And he was stunned by how little he got. Then, every autumn, you get this choreography of nuclear signaling: NATO's Steadfast Noon exercise, French drills such as Poker, and U.S.

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strategic drills such as Global Thunder for U.S. Strategic Command. On the other side, Putin is personally overseeing exercises, in uniform, flanked by Shoigu and Gerasimov, unveiling new systems, awarding designers, boasting that Russia has the most advanced nuclear arsenal in the world.

Trump watched Putin publicly embrace nuclear theatrics and felt betrayed. He thought (wrongly) that there could be a path to peace in Ukraine by engaging the Kremlin. Moreover, Russian and Chinese activities suggested to him they might be resuming or preparing for low-yield tests. His instinctive reaction was: if they are testing, maybe we should test too.

But when he spoke to his advisers, it became clear that a U.S. test could actually advantage Russia and China politically and diplomatically. So his messaging modulated. Still, the broader trajectory is that Trump moved from a naïve belief in personal deals with Putin and Xi towards a recognition that U.S. and Russian interests fundamentally diverge; coexistence is possible, deep cooperation is limited, but Russia "remains a scorpion" by nature. Those are hard lessons for any president.

Linas Kojala: *In your analysis you wrote that SACEUR's efforts and the DDA have created "a credible and dynamic deterrence posture," but that three main challenges remain: capability shortfalls, political cohesion, and command authority. What should NATO do in the next year to address these?*

William Alberque: On capability shortfalls, NATO has been talking about them since the early 1990s. But from the end of the Cold War until very recently, without agreed standing defense plans and without clearly naming Russia as an adversary, the entire defense

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Nuclear missiles on display at the National Museum of the United States Air Force. Kelly Michals.

planning process became, frankly, a kind of cosplay. We set capability targets; capitals negotiated them down; and often they were not delivered at all – because there were no standing plans that truly depended on those forces.

That has now changed. With the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) approved in 2020 and the new regional plans agreed in 2023, NATO has real standing defense plans and concrete force requirements in peacetime.

Now, at "zero state" (peacetime), SACEUR can say: we need this many deployable brigades, this much integrated air and missile defense, this many aircraft able to fly sorties from day one. If a country says, "We're 5,000 troops short," SACEUR can respond: "That's unacceptable; we now have a real gap in the line." That forces a culture shift in NATO headquarters and in capitals – from symbolic promises to deliverable capabilities. People who know how to plan, procure, and generate real forces have to replace those who were comfortable with the old fiction.

On political cohesion, what's remarkable is how the military side helped drag politics to reality. Since 2014, SACEURs understood that the 2010 Strategic Concept – calling Russia a "partner" after Crimea – was untenable. They began developing strategies and plans that treated Russia as an adversary in practice, presenting political leaders with a coherent military blueprint and forcing a conversation. Military consensus enabled the 2022 Strategic Concept's clearer language on Russia and China.

The question now is: can we sustain that consensus through elections and coalition changes? Will governments of very different stripes still agree that Russia is an adversary and China a systemic challenge? If yes, NATO is fine. Consensus is NATO's greatest strength; when you have it, it is rock solid. Diluting it with "consensus-minus" gimmicks would be a mistake.

On command authority, this is the oldest and hardest debate: when is SACEUR authorized to act, and how far can that go – especially pre-emptively? During the Cold War, there was pre-delegation of certain nuclear options – nuclear artillery, atomic demolition munitions along the inner-German border – because you could not wait for the North Atlantic Council (NAC) to convene under a Soviet attack.

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Today, under Article 51 of the UN Charter, you are not required to absorb a first strike if you have clear indications one is imminent; you are allowed to defend yourself so that you don't have to suffer a surprise attack. Are we willing to give SACEUR the authority to strike first? It's a big question.

you are allowed to defend yourself so that you don't have to suffer a surprise attack. Are we willing to give SACEUR the authority to strike first? It's a big question. If he sees that we're going to be attacked, does he have to convene the NAC? Does the Lithuanian ambassador have to run into the NAC and then run out and get on a WhatsApp chat and say, "Hey guys, what do you think? Should we say yes or no to war?" It's a tough question.

And that push-and-pull between the political and military sides over who gets to decide what and when in terms of the authorization of force – especially in the face of a Russia that will consistently probe for weaknesses, and where we may not even know we're at war by the time we're under attack.

That's another issue allies will have to confront directly. It's the question long framed through the PPGs – the Political Planning Guidelines for nuclear use in the Cold War. This was the central controversy, repeatedly, from the 1962 Athens decision through the 1966 creation of the Nuclear Planning Group, through the adoption of flexible response and subsequent debates. How far to delegate authority to the military command is a challenge for any democracy, but it is an especially acute one for NATO. And I don't mean "problem" in a pejorative sense – it is simply a dilemma we must work through. It's an inherent feature of how democracies function and how war is conducted in the 21st century.

In short, can we marshal forces and destroy a Russian attack before it kills our civilians?

Linas Kojala: *Let's turn to the grey zone. With so-called hybrid attacks, drones, sabotage, attacks on Russian opposition figures in Europe – are we at war with Russia? How should we name what's happening?*

William Alberque: Russia is at war with the West. Full stop. They have been for a long time.

In the 1990s, they were too busy collapsing internally to fight us effectively. The 2003 Iraq War and rising oil prices helped them re-fund their security apparatus and come back. Putin has always understood that institutions like the UN and OSCE can constrain Russia, so he has worked to hollow them out, and he has always believed Russia's best chance of survival is to go on the offensive.

We in the West spent years pretending otherwise, downplaying the 2007 cyberattack on Estonia, rationalizing the war against Georgia in 2008, and looking away from the annexation of Ukrainian territory. Lithuania and others on the frontline saw it clearly; many in Washington and Western Europe chose not to. By 2022, the illusion shattered. Finland and Sweden dropping non-alignment was a symptom of something that had been boiling for years.

Our unwillingness to call a spade a spade and say Russia is at war with us – whether we say we are at war with them almost doesn't matter for understanding the reality. We don't have to agree that we're at war. That's okay. They're still going to conduct war.

That's why it's always fascinating to me that we came up with the term "hybrid warfare." I'll never forget the day it came up in the NAC and the Allies were so proud to brief about NATO's definition of hybrid war and our efforts to counter it. You can imagine the Finnish Ambassador, hearing Allies describing something Finland is all-too-familiar with: "Hybrid warfare. It's so great NATO has a word for it now. We've been facing this since our independence, but now you have a word for it.

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Hybrid war is just a euphemism for interstate conflict. The term lets us feel like we're responding without fully acknowledging the severity of the conflict Russia is waging against us.

Fantastic." It is no wonder that Finland insisted on hosting the Centre of Excellence on Hybrid Warfare. I wouldn't trust us either...

It was one of those humbling moments. Hybrid war is just a euphemism for interstate conflict. The term lets us feel like we're responding without fully acknowledging the severity of the conflict Russia is waging against us. Whenever anyone uses the phrase "hybrid war" in a serious way, I think: you mean war. It's war; it's just not yet in the kinetic phase.

I think China is at war with us as well. They are more cautious about it, but they've been prepping the battlefield for decades and will continue to do so. And this isn't about something Trump said; it's the result of long-term decisions in Beijing, including during the Obama years when relations were supposedly at their best. The adversary gains a huge advantage when you leave them to shape the battlefield.

Linas Kojala: *Finally, what is your advice for countries like Lithuania? What should be prioritized in the coming years to stay safe and strengthen deterrence?*

William Alberque: Ten years ago, when I was asked this in Vilnius, I said: stop treating prestige platforms as the main metric of seriousness. Invest in people.

Instead of buying one very expensive aircraft, use that money to hire 100–500 additional professionals in your Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, intelligence services. They are force multipliers.

Lithuania did a lot of that. You created mechanisms to manage careers, opened pathways between think tanks and government, and sent volunteers into key NATO posts – in intelligence, in Russia analysis, in defence planning. NATO loves high-quality voluntary national contributions. It allowed Lithuania, with its size, to punch far above its weight.

That has to continue and be constantly reviewed. Every Lithuanian official in Brussels, at NATO, in the EU, working on trade or economics, should understand deterrence and national strategy. Nobody is exempt.

Lithuania should also open a structured dialogue with South Korea on conventional counterforce – on how to use conventional means to hold an adversary's nuclear forces at risk. South Korea has developed concepts like Kill Chain, KAMD and KMPR, and layered offensive and defensive tools – thinking through how to defeat a nuclear-armed adversary from day zero.

This is not primarily about money; it is conceptual. Lithuania could become a hub – like the Forest Brothers story, but for 21st-century deterrence – showing how a small state, without its own nuclear weapons, can meaningfully contribute to blunting Russian and Belarusian nuclear threats through conventional capabilities, deep strike, targeting, and integration with NATO planning.

That points towards creating a Centre of Excellence on Deterrence and Conventional Counterforce, outside NATO HQ, so it can do hard thinking, war-gaming, and politically sensitive conceptual work without being trapped by consensus rules – much like the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) in Helsinki.

Talk to South Koreans and other friends and partners that live under constant threat and think seriously about pre-empting or neutralizing that threat. Not everything will translate one-to-one; your geography and adversary are different. But they have decades of experience we can learn from, just as they can benefit from European know-how and production capacity.

Lithuania should invest in language skills, cultural literacy, officer exchanges, and visible political outreach – yes, even "Korea Days" in Vilnius if that's what it takes to build durable ties. Start now. It will be hard and slow, but the payoff – in concepts, not just hardware – could be transformative. ●

“Talks Without Surrender”: Hennadiy Maksak on Ukraine’s Dual Strategy

As 2025 closes, Ukraine lives with two parallel truths. Russian missiles and drones still pound cities and energy infrastructure. Diplomatically, Kyiv signals readiness for talks that might yield a stable ceasefire–even as Moscow shows no sign of softening its maximalist aims. **Hennadiy Maksak**, executive director of the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism,” discusses the country’s mood, President Zelenskyy’s leadership test, manpower strains, the drone war, a more complex relationship with Washington, and Europe’s role. His message: Ukraine is open to negotiations–but equally prepared for a long, grinding fight. Questions by **Linas Kojala**.

Linas Kojala: *What is the mood in Ukraine at the end of 2025?*

Hennadiy Maksak: It’s twofold. In the media and among officials, the line is that Ukraine is ready to be involved in negotiations and can propose formats that lead to a stable ceasefire–a preface to a wider agreement–even if we cannot immediately regain most of the occupied territories. That sums up 2025.

At the same time, everyone realises this is a long-term issue. We must prepare to be more autonomous over time, regardless of what partners decide. This is a war of attrition; for now, Ukraine may not recover all occupied territory.

On the societal level there is no collapse of morale. Despite total war from Russia–attacks on civilian infrastructure and steady casualties–society still stands strong. Some dynamics are weakening, yes. Polls show a larger share than in 2022 favour negotiations, but not at the expense of Ukraine’s core interests. You can hear that in President Zelenskyy’s speeches: more people want talks, but on our terms.

Editor’s note: Gallup, July 2025 – sixty-nine percent support beginning negotiations “as soon as possible,” up from twenty-two percent in 2022; support for “fight until victory” fell from seventy-three percent to twenty-four percent.

Linas Kojala: *President Zelenskyy remains the face of Ukraine’s wartime leadership, but sustaining trust is harder as the war drags on. The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology puts public trust in him at about sixty percent as of October 2025–down from over eighty percent in 2022 but steady this year. Does he still have the authority and public confidence to balance readiness for talks with the will to keep fighting?*

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Hennadiy Maksak: He’s still the leader to follow. He must show constant readiness to adapt to the war’s dynamics–and match that with Ukraine’s economic recovery. He keeps seeking partner help, speaks about ceasefire options, and pushes to strengthen Ukraine’s defence capability. He also has to convince partners that domestic institutions are strong enough to continue reforms.

Hennadiy Maksak, executive director of the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”. Oxu.az.

He must reflect society, while staying firm with partners and meeting public expectations.

Editor’s note: IMF baseline for 2025 projects plus two point zero percent GDP growth and twelve point six percent inflation–modest but positive under wartime conditions.

Linas Kojala: *In Western discussions, manpower shortages come up constantly–often framed as a limit to Ukraine’s staying power. There’s also a moral dimension: Ukrainians are the ones fighting and dying. How do you see this debate, both in military terms and in how it’s perceived abroad?*

Hennadiy Maksak: It’s an extremely difficult challenge. Only two countries in Europe truly know what large-scale mobilisation means today: Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine is adapting, but the situation is far from ideal.

Senior commanders are targeting different social groups, including eighteen–twenty-four-year-olds who are not formally obliged to serve but can be included through targeted programmes. Volunteering isn’t at 2022 levels, yet people still enlist. One option is short-term service: one-year contracts with comparatively high pay and bonuses. For some frontline roles–infantry or FPV operators–one-off remuneration for eighteen–twenty-four-year-olds can reach UAH 1,000,000 (approx. €23,500, Nov, 2025). Unlike others who serve three years or more with no clear end in sight, these contracts finish after a year, making them far more appealing.

Recruitment is evolving; there is no single fix. This issue will also surface across Europe: as hybrid threats rise and defence budgets grow, societies will

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Linas Kojala: *Many analysts point to drones and unmanned systems as decisive on the frontlines–FPV swarms, long-range loitering munitions and fibre-optic drones. Is the drone war now the key factor?*

Hennadiy Maksak: It’s vital but not everything. Manpower remains core. Russia still faces

Ukrainian service members during training.
Office of the President of Ukraine.

enormous casualties, but it keeps a surplus of contract recruitment. Let's be frank: we might be innovative, but Russia can scale up technologies faster. In drone kill zones, there's a Russian zone too. Fiber-optic and other drones impose high costs on Ukraine.

We'll need new approaches constantly to compensate–and manpower remains core. FPV drones still need crews: pilots and technical staff. These crews near the frontline are prime targets for Russia, because they know how important drone pilots are, sometimes even more than infantry. So both unmanned and manned are important.

Linas Kojala: *Over the past year, Ukraine's relationship with the U.S. has become more complex–shifting priorities in Washington, questions about long-term support. Yet U.S. backing remains crucial. How has the relationship evolved in 2025, and what can Washington realistically do to shape a ceasefire or peace process?*

Hennadiy Maksak: We learned a lot. First, there's no long-term policy that stays the same; things can change overnight. Even when a decision is announced, it may not be implemented. There were cases where high-level Ukrainian delegations came to Washington and were surprised by outcomes that didn't match expectations. We're still strategic partners, but we learned how to do more ourselves.

Second, focus on the triangle: no solution is possible without European partners. The NATO PURL project, which involves European funding for U.S. weaponry purchases, is a good example; even in a bilateral relationship, there's a European component. After the Alaska meeting, President Zelenskyy immediately contacted European leaders, which facilitated a positive meeting at the White House.

> But let's be honest: without the U.S. we don't have a real perspective for peace negotiations. To talk to Russia, you need an actor with big leverage. The U.S. is the only one today.

But let's be honest: without the U.S. we don't have a real perspective for peace negotiations. To talk to Russia, you need an actor with big leverage. The U.S. is the only one today. Maybe China in the future, but not now. The U.S. has the toolkit to reach the Kremlin and bring them to a table in different formats–yes, sometimes with some hypocrisy or insufficient understanding of the Kremlin, but these attempts can yield results.

Linas Kojala: *Much attention has focused on long-range strike systems, including Tomahawk missiles. Are Tomahawks the key ask from Washington?*

Hennadiy Maksak: We face total war from Russia; they strike across all of Ukraine. Our strategy is two-way. First, protect civilians–for that we need sophisticated air defence. We lack batteries, interceptors, other equipment; we depend on the U.S. for that. They

produce Patriot systems and components. Some European alternatives aren't the same scale, even if very important. So air defence is essential.

Second, we need a long arm. We must hit strategic Russian sites–economic and military. We have Flamingo, Neptune and other missiles, but scale matters, also production pace, range, accuracy. Tomahawk is a tested technology, part of a deterrence system. Russia is signalling to the U.S. that it's concerned about the Tomahawk debate; that's a good sign. But even if a decision is announced, we need practical deliveries–we'll see how it goes. That's point two.

Three, other leverage should be used. U.S. sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil were significant, done with European partners. They can have a tangible impact. It's important Europeans and Americans coordinate to make sanctions more effective.

Many Russian crimes weren't punished before–look at Georgia in 2008. We need a clear signal that all crimes will be prosecuted and that justice will be delivered.

Linas Kojala: *Europe has provided wide-ranging military, financial and humanitarian support. Where does it matter most now: the battlefield, sanctions and reconstruction, or shaping a political vision for a fair peace?*

Hennadiy Maksak: Wartime diplomacy has many layers: sanctions, macro-financial support, military support, justice and war-crime prosecution, recovery, humanitarian aid. Put it all together and European partners are the biggest contributors across those issues. In dialogues, Americans tend to speak of "stable peace," Europeans of "stable and fair peace." It's a broader view.

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Linas Kojala: *Finally, the Baltics. If Ukraine is weakened or pushed into an unfavourable ceasefire, how immediate is the threat to the Baltics and Europe's eastern flank?*

Hennadiy Maksak: We view Russia through the same lens. Ukraine was first in line–aside from Georgia. If Ukraine falls because of insufficient allied solidarity, allies themselves will be second in line. The Baltics understand that perfectly. There are no illusions about the Kremlin–politically or militarily. The only question is timing, if deterrence fails.

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer meeting President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2025.
UK Government / No 10 Downing Street.

“Unity, Responsibility, and a Europe That Can Decide”: Philippe Étienne on Ukraine, NATO, and Strategic Sovereignty

Philippe Étienne – former Ambassador of France to the United States (2019–2023) and chairman of Liberation Mission – reflects on Europe’s response to Russia’s war, Ukraine’s path to the EU and NATO, transatlantic dynamics in the Trump era, France’s nuclear debate, and the state of French–Lithuanian ties. Questions by **Linas Kojala**.

Philippe Étienne, president of the Mission Libération.
Mission Libération / French Ministry of the Armed Forces.

Linas Kojala: *As we approach the fourth year of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, how would you assess the Western response so far – in terms of sanctions, military and financial support, and political unity?*

Philippe Étienne: We have immediately (when Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022) shown unity both between the Europeans and the U.S., and inside the EU, even if some argue that the answer should have been stronger at the very beginning instead of the incremental increase of the sanctions and military support we have witnessed. Back in 2022, you will remember that the then French Presidency of the European Union obtained a consensus on the prospect for Ukraine and Moldova to become full members of the EU and (at the informal summit in Versailles, 10/11 March) got a clear political statement by all Member States on the pathway to a true European sovereignty/independence in energy (related to Russian imports), defence and economy. It is true that Hungary has since then objected to the intensification of sanctions but without blocking them. In other words, we can consider that, facing the increased aggressivity of

Russia, the Europeans have displayed unity. It is obviously not easy to sustain this flow of support, including through the next years, including the financial support to Ukraine, but it is vital to do so.

Linas Kojala: *Do you see a realistic pathway for Ukraine to join the European Union and NATO? From your perspective, what remain the key obstacles to achieving these goals?*

Philippe Étienne: I think the questions of NATO and EU accession should not necessarily be seen together in spite of the fact that the context is the same. As I recalled, the principle of the EU accession has been agreed. It will take time and we know the difficulties, not only related to the war but also to the size and the specificities of the candidate, with not easy negotiations ahead on agriculture and budgets for instance. But the security and financial support given by Europe already creates some favourable conditions for approximating the EU and Ukraine. Moreover, this accession would directly contribute to the strategic autonomy of the European Union, at many levels. The Ukrainians are showing every day with their courageous resistance their capacity of innovation and resilience and their contribution to our common objectives. As far as NATO accession is concerned, we have other partners involved, starting with the United States, and the link with any future postwar security arrangements is still more obvious. But NATO does

... the questions of NATO and EU accession should not necessarily be seen together in spite of the fact that the context is the same. As I recalled, the principle of the EU accession has been agreed.

already play today an important role in supporting Ukraine and to improve the security of its most exposed members. And the coalition of the willing launched by France and the UK shows how anyway the issue of security guarantees for Ukraine have to be to be seriously tackled.

Linas Kojala: *Many observers believe that the start of President Trump's second term in 2025 marks a new phase in transatlantic relations. Given your extensive experience in the United States, do you share this view? How would you describe the current state of the transatlantic partnership?*

Philippe Étienne: Everybody recognizes the shift brought by the re-election of Donald Trump but we should also see one basic element of continuity. For years now, and independently of who is President, America has been calling the Europeans to carry their fair share in the security of our countries and our continent. The recent NATO summit in The Hague has brought good news in this

French President Emmanuel Macron with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump during a meeting in Paris. Office of the President of Ukraine.

French President Emmanuel Macron with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump during a meeting in Paris. Office of the President of Ukraine.

My experience of the U.S. is that our American Ally will remain committed in the long term to our European security only if we, Europeans, are able to display a real commitment and sufficient (material and political) investment in what is primarily our responsibility.

respect but it is not only a question of money. It is also a question of vision and political will. My experience of the U.S. is that our American Ally will remain committed in the long term to our European security only if we, Europeans, are able to display a real commitment and sufficient (material and political) investment in what is primarily our responsibility. We have been seeing recently some encouraging signals in this respect with a number of new programs funded by the EU budget aiming at increasing the European defence-industrial capability, and its capacity to coordinate across our borders in Europe.

Linas Kojala: *In recent months, President Trump has repeatedly praised NATO – a contrast to his earlier criticisms. Do you see this as a genuine shift in his approach, or a tactical adjustment?*

Philippe Étienne: As I said the Americans will support all the more NATO if their European Allies are really decided to do more. The support of Ukraine here is an essential test by the way. The more positive statements of President Trump you mention follow the positive outcome of the summit in the Netherlands. But the Europeans should not entertain the illusion that we are back to the situation from some years ago. The world is changing fast and we have to adapt, in particular in stepping up our

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efforts for our own defence.

Linas Kojala: *European countries, led by France, have pursued a dual strategy: keeping the United States engaged in European and Ukrainian security, while simultaneously strengthening Europe's own defense capabilities. Has sufficient progress been made on this front? And can Europe realistically aspire to true strategic sovereignty in defense in the near future?*

Philippe Étienne: I already explained how these two goals, keeping the U.S. engaged and strengthening our European capabilities, are intertwined. Sovereignty does not mean separation from our most important Ally, be it in defence or in any other field. It means that we are able to take our decisions in our own interests without every time asking the Americans to come and help us. Again, this is the best way to convince them that they should remain committed to our Alliance and ready to step in when their support is really essential to our common security. Unfortunately, the world we live in is not becoming less dangerous, on the contrary; all of us, we still need this alliance between countries sharing the same basic values.

Linas Kojala: *President Macron has reopened the discussion on extending France's nuclear deterrent to other European countries – a proposal that has been received positively in parts of Central and Northern Europe. However, experts note that France's nuclear doctrine remains unchanged and that technical limitations persist. How do you interpret this initiative and its potential significance?*

Philippe Étienne: It is not my intention to interpret a doctrine of nuclear deterrence which has been exposed very clearly a couple of times by President Macron, and by his predecessors, in dedicated speeches. These speeches are the essential references in this domain. Our President had already proposed in the past to open a dialogue with our European partners. What is new is not this proposal but the fact that, due probably to the worsening international context, some of these partners have recently shown interest in this proposal which is indeed a positive evolution.

Linas Kojala: *Finally, how would you characterize the current state of French–Lithuanian relations? What role does Lithuania play in France's broader discourse on European security and the vision of a "common European home"?*

Philippe Étienne: Lithuania is an important partner of France in the Baltic region considering our bilateral relations, as well as our cooperation within NATO, EU and on the multilateral scene, in all realms. Our countries renewed their strategic partnership earlier this year, as a sign of friendship but furthermore it shows our joint willingness to reinforce our concrete cooperation in key areas like defence and security.

Lithuania is an important partner of France in the Baltic region considering our bilateral relations, as well as our cooperation within NATO, EU and on the multilateral scene, in all realms. Our countries renewed their strategic partnership earlier this year, as a sign of friendship but but above all it shows our joint willingness to reinforce our concrete cooperation in key areas like defence and security.

Your country brings high value to our European Union with its historical experience and its understanding of the elements which are today common threats. Lithuania was actually the first and most vocal EU member State to back and support our President's discourse discourse on strategic ambiguity. It seems that together, we can deepen our common analysis and better build our European sovereignty. We can also reinforce our cooperation within the new EDIP and SAFE program. To continue to build our "common European home", the upcoming Lithuanian EU Presidency will be key to work closer. ●

"Deterrence, Messaging, and a Europe-Led Defense": An Interview with Ilan Berman

As Russia's war grinds on, Europe faces a test of stamina, narrative, and resources. **Ilan Berman**, Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council (Washington, DC), argues that Central and Eastern part of Europe is mobilizing in earnest while parts of Western Europe remain less seized by the urgency; that information power is as vital as battlefield success; and that Washington's ask for Europe to "do more" is both appropriate and strategically necessary. Questions by **Linas Kojala**.

Linas Kojala: *You wrote that "in Europe today, there's a near-universal consensus about the need to confront Russian aggression. But a number of states aren't doing the hard part." How durable do you think Europe's support for Ukraine actually is in the long term?*

Ilan Berman: It has been a long time coming, but I think Europe is finally awake to the threat posed by Russia – and the need to resolutely stand against it. The mobilization that's now visible in Eastern Europe and the Baltics is real, and serious. It reflects the gravity of the danger posed by a Neo-imperial Russia to countries on its periphery. Unfortunately, not all countries on the continent are equally seized with the immediacy of the problem. For Western European states, the danger is perceived as being more distant, and that has a bearing on long-term support for Ukraine – and for the cohesion of Europe as a whole. More work needs to be done here to explain to Western European states not just the gravity of the threat, but the need for a rapid, cohesive response that can adequately deter the Kremlin.

Ilan Berman, senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council. AFPC.

A damaged residential building in Borodyanka after a Russian attack. Ales Ustinov.

Linas Kojala: *You have argued that "information truly is power... the ability to shape perceptions, to win hearts and minds, and to define the terms of national debate is as important as battlefield success." Given Russia's ongoing influence operations, how effectively is the United States using this dimension of power today? Where do you see the biggest gaps – and how can partners such as Lithuania help close them?*

Ilan Berman: I wish the news was better in this regard, but America is very much missing in action in the information sphere at the moment. Since taking office earlier this year, the Trump administration has worked to systematically dismantle the organs of U.S. international broadcasting, such as VOA and Radio Free Europe, and to turn out the lights at their parent agency, the U.S. Agency for Global Media. The result has been a massive constriction of U.S. broadcasting – and an increasing informational void abroad, which Russia (as well as actors like China and Iran) are at present actively working to fill. This retraction leaves American allies more vulnerable to Russian disinformation. Countries like Lithuania need to fill the void by expanding their own messaging, and by improving the robustness of their own responses to Russian disinformation, until such time as America hopefully gets back into the informational game.

Vladimir Putin isn't seeking an off-ramp in his war on Ukraine. Rather, Russian policy clearly envisions the complete subjugation of Ukraine as its strategic objective.

Linas Kojala: *More than three years into the full-scale war, how would you describe Russia's strategic calculus? Is Moscow focused primarily on attrition and exhaustion, or on shaping conditions for a later strategic reset? What does that mean for U.S. and European policy planning in 2026?*

Ilan Berman: I think it's now abundantly clear that Vladimir Putin isn't seeking an off-ramp in his war on Ukraine. Rather, Russian policy clearly envisions the complete subjugation of Ukraine as its strategic objective. Moreover, Putin has staked so much on this military adventure that it's hard to imagine how a compromise might materialize – short of massive economic pressure, ongoing military aid to Ukraine, and a concerted effort to decouple Russia from external partners like China and Iran. Both Washington and European capitals need to adapt accordingly for the coming year.

Linas Kojala: *The U.S. global role is being tested both domestically – budgetary pressures, political polarization – and internationally, where allies are being asked to take on more responsibility. How should Washington recalibrate its presence in the Russia-Ukraine theater to maintain influence without overstretching? What is the trade-off space?*

Ilan Berman: President Trump's demands that Europe "do more" for its own defense are entirely appropriate, insofar as many European states have long relied on the U.S. to serve as the guarantor of continental security. We are now seeing at least some European states shoulder a greater share of the burden for continental defense. That is appropriate, and welcome in Washington. The more they continue to do so, the easier it will be to convince this Administration – and the next one – that ongoing American involvement in funding European defense writ large is a good bargain, and nets substantial dividends.

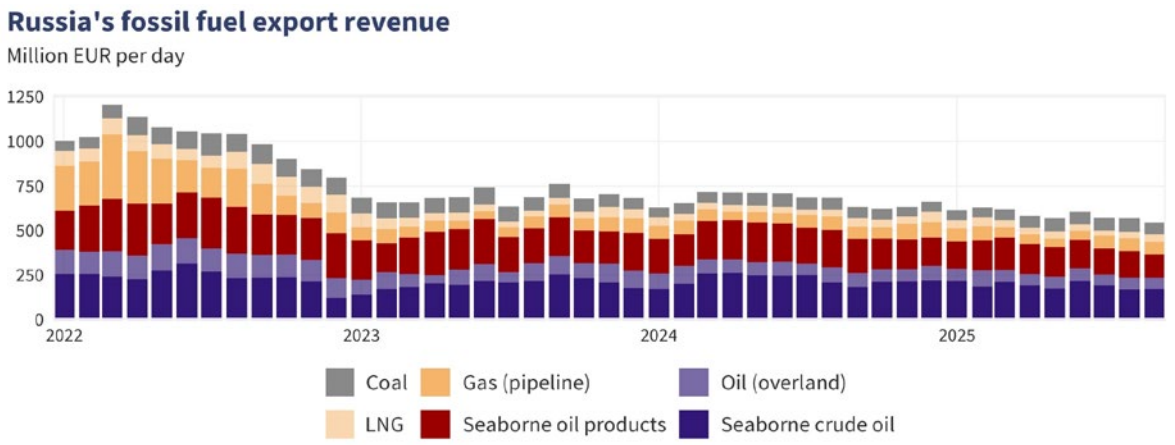
President Trump's demands that Europe "do more" for its own defense are entirely appropriate, insofar as many European states have long relied on the U.S. to serve as the guarantor of continental security.

Linas Kojala: *Energy and trade dependencies continue to provide Russia with financial resilience. In your October 2025 analysis, you noted that Europe's purchases of Russian energy have "assisted – even if only modestly – in perpetuating Russia's war effort." What practical steps should the United States, Lithuania, and other NATO members prioritize to close these remaining vulnerabilities?*

Ilan Berman: This should be a matter of urgent attention. Things like accelerating plans for a ban on Russian LNG, for instance, would help reduce revenues still flowing into the Russian economy. Additionally, proposals under consideration for using frozen Russian assets for the defense of Ukraine would provide a quick way to augment aid already flowing to Kyiv while simultaneously serving as a punitive lesson for Moscow.

Linas Kojala: *For Lithuania and the wider Baltic region, the war in Ukraine is not simply a regional conflict – it is core to national security. How do you see U.S. strategy shifts aligning with Baltic security concerns, and what are the most important strategic messages Vilnius should be conveying to Washington?*

Ilan Berman: The most important strategic message for American audiences is that Ukraine is not an isolated conflict, but a potential bellwether of things to come. The more U.S. policymakers and the American public at large understand that Russia, under Putin, is a revisionist



Russia's fossil fuel export revenue by energy source, 2022–2025. CREA.

The more U.S. policymakers and the American public at large understand that Russia, under Putin, is a revisionist neo-imperial state that is actively seeking to revise and undermine the Western-led democratic order, the better.

neo-imperial state that is actively seeking to revise and undermine the Western-led democratic order, the better. At the moment, that message resonates in some corners in Washington. However, it needs far more amplification. Ultimately, what Americans need to understand is that the Kremlin's war on Ukraine is part of a broader effort to remake Europe – and if Putin isn't stopped there, he'll need to be stopped elsewhere, at far greater cost.

Linas Kojala: *Finally, looking beyond Europe: how will the evolving U.S. global role – particularly in the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East – shape the future of the war in Ukraine? To what extent will decisions made in those theaters indirectly determine Ukraine's strategic position?*

Ilan Berman: This is a key question. There is a real danger of the United States failing to "connect the dots," so to speak, and continuing to treat Europe and the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East as separate, disconnected theaters. This would be a real miscalculation, because Russia, China and Iran are actively interacting and cooperating – and what happens in one theater will inform the strategic calculations of those countries in others. At the

Russia, China and Iran are actively interacting and cooperating – and what happens in one theater will inform the strategic calculations of those countries in others. At the moment, there are still gaps in this understanding here in the United States.

moment, there are still gaps in this understanding here in the United States. Those need to be clarified, and policymakers in Washington need to comprehend that America's adversaries are actively collaborating and learning from one another. In other words, what happens in Europe will have tremendous bearing on stability in the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East, and vice versa.

A Frontline State Chairs Europe in 2027

Conversation with Lithuania's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigitas Mitkus

As Lithuania prepares to assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2027, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigitas Mitkus explains how a state on NATO's front line plans to lead the Union – keeping Ukraine and enlargement at the top of the agenda, strengthening EU security and competitiveness, and proving that Vilnius can act as an honest broker with long-term strategic ambitions.

Lithuania held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the first time in 2013. What differences do you see in the preparation process now? To what extent has Lithuania, in a positive sense, become accustomed to hosting large-scale international formats, especially after organizing the NATO Summit in 2023?

– Our first Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2013 required extensive preparation, as Lithuania had to rapidly develop the administrative capacity, inter-institutional coordination, and logistical arrangements necessary for a successful term. At that time, preparations began years in advance, focused on building internal consensus on Presidency priorities, training personnel, and ensuring alignment with EU expectations, while balancing our national interests with the broader EU agenda. The challenges included navigating high external expectations, a demanding legislative workload, and establishing credibility as a relatively new and small Member State.

Since then, Lithuania's experience has significantly matured. The organization of the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius demonstrates that we have become accustomed to hosting large-scale international formats. Lessons learned from the 2013 EU Presidency – particularly in strategic planning and financial management, inter-institutional coordination, and management of complex agendas – have been consolidated and applied to subsequent events. Preparation processes for the 2027 EU Presidency are now more streamlined, with well-established mechanisms for prioritisation, engagement with stakeholders, and logistical execution. Lithuania has also strengthened its know-how to mediate and facilitate dialogue at the highest levels. Ministries and decision-making bodies operate under a clear EU Affairs

The organization of the 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius demonstrates that we have become accustomed to hosting large-scale international formats. Lessons learned from the 2013 EU Presidency – particularly in strategic planning and financial management, inter-institutional coordination, and management of complex agendas – have been consolidated and applied to subsequent events.

Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigitas Mitkus stresses that Lithuania has already agreed its core priorities for the 2027 EU Council Presidency. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania.

Coordination framework with structured internal guidelines. Government officials benefit from substantially broader EU-level negotiation experience. There is a well-developed understanding of how to engage in the EU Presidency and navigate the political, logistical, and communication demands associated with Lithuania's Presidency of the Council of the EU.

What are the main challenges in the current preparation phase that need to be addressed?

– We have just a bit more than a year until the official start of our Presidency, and several key challenges therefore merit careful and timely attention. First, the geopolitical context remains highly dynamic, turbulent, and unpredictable. The European Union continues to operate in an environment shaped by persistent tensions in its immediate neighbourhood, including security challenges stemming from Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine and hybrid threats coming from Belarus.

The European Union continues to operate in an environment shaped by persistent tensions in its immediate neighbourhood, including security challenges stemming from Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine and hybrid threats coming from Belarus.

At the same time, external challenges such as global economic volatility, evolving transatlantic relations, and emerging strategic competitions – particularly in the Indo-Pacific – require careful calibration of EU foreign policy priorities. Moreover, the forthcoming period will see a substantial legislative agenda, with important EU decisions in the policy areas of climate, digital transition, and internal market reforms.

Finally, the ongoing discussions on the upcoming EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034 will require proactive coordination, given its central significance for the Union's strategic priorities, and efforts to build consensus on the related EU legislation not only between the EU Member States, but also among the Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament.

What do you see as the key priorities for Lithuania at this stage of the Presidency? And to what extent might these priorities evolve, given the rapidly changing geopolitical and economic context?

– Lithuania's Presidency has identified key priorities, as approved by the Government and the Parliament in June 2025. First and foremost is the strengthening of the security and defence of the European Union and the Euro-Atlantic area, ensuring continued full support for Ukraine and adequate defence funding. This reflects Lithuania's commitment to a resilient and united European security architecture.

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Second, Lithuania will focus on EU enlargement, the promotion of European values in the Union's neighbourhood, and the preservation of a rules-based international order. These efforts are essential for fostering stability, predictability, and the consistent application of EU principles beyond the Union's borders.

Third, advancing EU competitiveness remains a central objective. This includes promoting innovation, technological development, sustainability, and economic resilience, as well as ensuring that the Multiannual Financial Framework effectively responds to the Union's evolving needs.

Fourth, internal security, preparedness, and democratic resilience will continue to be a priority. This encompasses the effective management of migration and external borders, strengthening societal cohesion, and fostering a common European historical memory while actively combating the manipulation and falsification of historical facts.

Finally, Lithuania will pay particular attention to social security and demographic challenges, with the aim of enhancing the resilience of European societies in the context of long-term structural changes.

By what criteria do you plan to evaluate the success of the Presidency? Presumably, the assessment will go beyond formal political outcomes and decisions?

– Lithuania will be an honest and impartial broker during its Presidency. We will take over at the mid-term of the current EU political cycle; therefore, there will be many EU legislative and other proposals on the table, and we will need to handle them in the process leading to their adoption, also in co-operation with the European Parliament. We are preparing for that and will drive EU legislation forward. Lithuania would like to see the EU get stronger, more resilient, and competitive. Also, we want to see Ukraine and Moldova getting closer to the EU, becoming more secure, modern European countries.

Lithuania will be an honest and impartial broker during its Presidency.

President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė hosted EU leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, during Lithuania's first EU Council Presidency in 2013. EU2013.lt.

It is often noted that Lithuania prepares for the Presidency with particular seriousness and attention to detail – possibly even more so than some other EU Member States. Would you agree with that assessment?

– While we do not wish to compare ourselves with other EU Member States, I can say that Lithuania prepares very thoroughly for our Presidency. We started active preparation in 2024, three years in advance, as many other Member States do. We also learn from others and work closely with other EU Member States and EU institutions.

A significant part of this work is carried out by the Permanent Representation of Lithuania to the EU, which plays an essential role in engaging with partners and ensuring that our positions are effectively represented at all levels. Equally important is the hard work of our diplomatic staff in Vilnius, who work closely with relevant Lithuanian institutions and national experts. These common efforts ensure that Lithuania approaches its Presidency in a well-co-ordinated manner.

Lithuania will take over the Presidency from Ireland and later pass it on to Greece. How does the 'Trio' mechanism work in practice, and how closely are priorities and decisions coordinated among these countries?

– Within the framework of the Trio mechanism, preparations for the common 18-month programme are already well underway. Lithuania is working closely with Ireland and Greece to identify a balanced approach that incorporates the most important priorities of each country. The Trio Presidency ensures continuity and coherence across consecutive Presidencies by fostering co-ordinated planning of legislative and policy priorities, facilitating

Lithuania has been a member of the European Union since 2004.
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania.

Lithuania is working closely with Ireland and Greece to identify a balanced approach that incorporates the most important priorities of each country. The Trio Presidency ensures continuity and coherence across consecutive Presidencies by fostering co-ordinated planning of legislative and policy priorities, facilitating structured handovers of ongoing initiatives and dossiers, and promoting strategic alignment on key EU objectives.

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This system enables countries to manage the Council's workload, avoid gaps in policy implementation, and maintain steady progress on major initiatives that range from legislative proposals to high-level political decisions.

What message would you like to convey to international partners and audiences regarding Lithuania's upcoming Presidency?

– As the Presidency, Lithuania will do its part in ensuring active dialogue and close partnership with the European Commission, the European Parliament, the EU Member States, and all other partners engaged with the EU's multifaceted agenda.

Beyond the EU, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has deeply impacted the life of the European continent. Lithuania strongly supports Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity and will further extend its sustainable support for Ukraine, its recovery and reconstruction, as well as further integration into the EU. We expect our partners and international audiences to have the same attitude when looking at Ukraine's long-term security.

Furthermore, in the face of growing insecurity in Europe and the world, Lithuania expects that together with our international allies and strategic partners we will strengthen global peace and security, benefit from a stronger and more capable EU in defence and security, while upholding the rules-based international order and effective multilateralism.

“Citizens First, Total Defense Always”: An Interview with Colonel Linas Idzelis on the Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union

Lieutenant Colonel Linas Idzelis, commander of the Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union. Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union / sauliusajunga.lt.

As Russia’s war against Ukraine reshapes Europe’s security thinking, Lithuania is doubling down on a whole-of-society approach to defense. The Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union (Lietuvos šaulių sąjunga, LŠS) sits at the heart of that effort–bridging civilians and the armed forces, building resilience, and translating lessons from Ukraine into practical capabilities at home. In this conversation, **Colonel Linas Idzelis**, Commander of the LŠS, explains the Union’s mission, its cooperation with state institutions, the challenges of rapid growth, and what “total defense” should mean in the 21st century. Questions by **Linas Kojala**.

Linas Kojala: *The Riflemen’s Union has a long history and strong traditions. How would you describe the current state of the LŠS? How do you understand its core mission in the context of today’s geopolitical events? What should international partners know about the Union?*

Colonel Linas Idzelis: The LŠS played an important historical role in restoring the Lithuanian state, developing national culture, sport, and military affairs; its members actively participated in the wars of independence in 1919–1920, in organizing and carrying out the bringing back of the Klaipėda region to Lithuania in 1923, and in resisting the occupation of the Soviet Union in 1944–1953. In 1989, when the LŠS was re-established, its members actively participated in the defense of the restored independence of the Republic of Lithuania in 1991.

Service as a rifleman is one of the ways for citizens of the Republic of Lithuania to prepare to exercise their constitutional right and duty to defend the Homeland, enshrined in the first part of Article 139 of the

In modern Lithuania, the LŠS has a unique role in preparing citizens for total defense and in strengthening societal resilience and the will to resist.

Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, and in peacetime to prepare for total defense.

In modern Lithuania, the LŠS has a unique role in preparing citizens for total defense and in strengthening societal resilience and the will to resist. By the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union, the LŠS is tasked to participate both in armed defense and in unarmed civil resistance; therefore, the Union's multifaceted involvement in national defense–strengthening LŠS combat platoons, garrison and specialized units, and unarmed resistance capacities–is an essential condition for ensuring the LŠS role in implementing the principle of total defense.

The LŠS contributes to voluntary military training of citizens of the Republic of Lithuania and to promoting service in the Lithuanian Armed Forces (LK), enhancing the authority of the LK and the prestige of military service, and strengthening society's ties with institutions of the national defence system (KAS).

The LŠS devotes considerable attention to developing young riflemen by expanding youth units, organizing camps for young riflemen and for schoolchildren who are not members of the LŠS during school holidays. Since 2022, the LŠS has organized the Civics and Defense Skills Course (PGĮK). From the 2024–2025 academic year this course became mandatory for all 9th-grade students in general education schools, thus contributing not only to the civic and patriotic education of young riflemen but also of other Lithuanian students, as well as to preparedness for emergencies and crises. From the 2025–2026 academic year we plan to expand PGĮK to grades 7–8, and from 2028–2029 to grades 5–6.

Since the start of the Russian Federation's large-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the LŠS has become one of the main organizations in Lithuania developing unmanned aerial vehicle capabilities. Lessons identified from Russia's war in Ukraine were one of the key conditions for the LŠS to begin developing cyber defense, information support, medical and other specialized units in order to support KAS and other state and municipal institutions and agencies.

...the LŠS has become one of the main organizations in Lithuania developing unmanned aerial vehicle capabilities.

Linas Kojala: *What is the relationship between the LŠS and state institutions–the armed forces and security services?*

Colonel Linas Idzelis: At present, the LŠS makes a significant contribution to ensuring national security by assisting state and municipal institutions in guaranteeing the performance of vital state functions in crises and emergencies and, if necessary, during mobilization and wartime.

The LŠS provided assistance during the COVID-19 crisis and the surge in illegal migration; it supported the Government Chancellery's National Crisis Management Center, the Lithuanian Police, and the State Border Guard Service (VSAT under the Ministry of the Interior) during the NATO summit. Currently, the LŠS is actively cooperating with the LK and VSAT to counter the threat posed by contraband balloons to civil aviation and public safety.

Under the Law on Martial Law of the Republic of Lithuania, LŠS combat platoons become an integral part of the Armed Forces (GP) upon the declaration of martial law. Proposals have been submitted to amend the laws so that during martial law not only combat platoons but also LŠS garrison and specialized units would be included in the GP.

Linas Kojala: *What mission should the LŠS perform in the event of a military threat to Lithuania? How do you respond to the often-heard public question: I don't know what I should do in the face of danger–where to go, whom to ask, whom to call?*

The Lithuanian Riflemen's Union during its largest training exercise "Black Hawk 2025".
Lithuanian Riflemen's Union / sauliusajunga.lt.

Colonel Linas Idzelis: A qualitative survey of citizens open to LŠS membership conducted in 2024 identified that a large part of society still does not know the place of the LŠS in the country's overall defense structure and does not understand the activities and benefits of the LŠS in peacetime. For many citizens, the LŠS still appears to be a closed paramilitary organization with no place for those who cannot or do not want to participate in armed resistance. Unclear LŠS functions and a lack of understanding about the spectrum of LŠS activities do not allow the organization to attract candidates who are not drawn to uniforms and armed activities.

We seek to strengthen society's understanding of the concept of total defense and the citizen's role in it. As the main organization responsible for preparing and mobilizing society for total defense, the LŠS assumes the responsibility to ensure that citizens are motivated to participate in the armed or unarmed defense of the country and to find their place within the total defense system. At the same time, the LŠS is taking steps to strengthen citizens' understanding of geopolitical threats and their possible consequences, and of the importance of total defense for the state's future and the fate of the nation.

We seek to shape and maintain a positive image of the LŠS as a modern, open, and socially necessary organization. The LŠS is presented as an organization open to all citizens of the Republic of Lithuania, living both in Lithuania and abroad, uniting people of different views, religions, ages, and genders, and having a clear vision and defined functions within the total defense structure.

We aim to clarify the two main directions of LŠS activity–armed and unarmed resistance–indicating the functions of each and society's opportunities to join them. The LŠS is one of the most flexible alternatives for participating in total defense, with the broadest opportunities to involve citizens of various age groups, competencies, and levels of preparedness.

Linas Kojala: *What are the key challenges in your work? How do you plan to address them, and what outcome after one year would look good to you?*

Members of the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union during field exercises. Lithuanian Riflemen's Union / sauliusajunga.lt.

Colonel Linas Idzelis: The following organizational challenges in the internal activities of the LŠS are distinguished:

Rapid LŠS expansion. As a consequence of Lithuanian citizens' reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the number of LŠS members increased sharply in 2021–2022; it stabilized in 2023–2024, but the number of new members continues to grow steadily. With the number of adult riflemen having increased by more than 100% (as of 2020-12-31–5,021 riflemen; 2025-09-30–11,069 riflemen), while the number of full-time staff in the management and leadership structure did not increase proportionally, the organization is experiencing challenges in administering the LŠS, organizing military training and instruction for riflemen, which may in future negatively affect riflemen's determination, activity, and readiness to improve the quality of LŠS activities, as well as to spread riflemen's values and civic-mindedness in Lithuanian society.

Conducting military training. Not all LŠS units (especially in riflemen battalions with fewer members) are able to organize military training with their own unit capabilities. Due to both the existing lack of competence and the small number of riflemen in units, battalion leaderships are forced to organize joint battalion training exercises, inviting riflemen from different units of the battalion to attend, which is often not efficient and requires additional financial and time resources.

Infrastructure needs. As the number of LŠS members grows and military training intensifies, the need for infrastructure–especially shooting ranges and training areas–increases. With the significant increase in LK training activities and in joint exercises with NATO partners, the occupancy of LK training areas and ranges has risen, which reduces the LŠS's ability to use LK training areas and shooting ranges.

Supply. The number of weapons, ammunition, and uniforms available to the LŠS does not allow for proper equipping of all riflemen in LŠS combat, garrison, and specialized units. This has a direct negative impact on military training and on riflemen's motivation. The LŠS also faces challenges related to the storage of weapons and ammunition.

Linas Kojala: *It is often said that the entire society must be ready to resist in the event of a threat. How do you understand this concept? Is Lithuania moving in this direction? Where has progress been made, and where are the gaps? How is this applied in the 21st century?*

Colonel Linas Idzelis: At the state level, there is much and constant discussion about civil resistance, but among various responsible institutions there is no unified vision and understanding of the structure of civil resistance and of citizens' functions. In the public sphere, different terms–"civil resistance" and "total defense"–are used interchangeably, but there is a failure to explain to society what they are and how they differ.

Society still lives in a state of feigned security and denial of threats. The problem lies not only in denying the probability of military invasion but also in the lack of imagination about what life would be like under conditions of war and occupation.

Society still lives in a state of feigned security and denial of threats. The problem lies not only in denying the probability of military invasion but also in the lack of imagination about what life would be like under conditions of war and occupation. There is a lack of understanding about the cruelty of the current Kremlin regime and its policy of destroying occupied nations. Some politicians view attempts to help society grasp the true scale of the threat negatively, fearing widespread panic, new waves of emigration, and stagnating domestic and foreign investment. Efforts to speak about threats are treated as incitement of panic, harm to the state, or politicking. The LŠS leadership officially has limited opportunities to disseminate information that contradicts dominant political narratives.

Russia's actions in Ukraine raise doubts about the possibility, during a war with Russia, of implementing unarmed civil resistance in Lithuania. It is necessary–urgently, at the state level–to review the conventions of civil resistance/total defense and adapt them to the tactics used by a potential adversary, taking into account that the Russian army does not observe the principles of the law of war and poses a real threat to the inhabitants of occupied territories–killing civilian men, forcibly conscripting them into the occupation army; women being raped; children being forcibly deported.

Linas Kojala: *Which international partners do you work most closely with? From whom are you seeking to learn best practices? Where could the LŠS help other countries?*

Colonel Linas Idzelis: International cooperation with related foreign organizations is being intensified. A cooperation agreement has been signed with the Association of Reserve Officers of the German Armed Forces. LŠS activity in the diaspora is being rapidly expanded.

In 2025, a cooperation agreement was signed between the LŠS and the LŠS in the diaspora (Canada and the USA); currently, the LŠS has units in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, and Luxembourg. We are considering closer cooperation with related organizations in Poland and maintain contacts with Taiwan.

During the war between Ukraine and Russia, the LŠS is trying to absorb identified and learned lessons from the Armed Forces of Ukraine; LŠS personnel are constantly being sent to Ukraine for experience-sharing.

During the LŠS exercise "Black Hawk," the leadership of the Latvian National Guard (Zemesardze) and representatives of Polish organizations related to the riflemen visited–experience in developing unmanned aerial vehicles, in implementing modern battle management systems, in creating medical support capabilities–experience that we pass on to foreign partners.

Linas Kojala: *What conclusions about war and security threats do you draw from observing Ukraine's fight for freedom?*

Colonel Linas Idzelis: A systematic and all-encompassing state approach is necessary when preparing for national defense. Our country's strength lies not only in the Lithuanian Armed Forces and NATO, but also in involving the entire society in total defense–and not necessarily armed.

The development of new technologies–unmanned aerial vehicles, communications and information systems, cybersecurity, and robotics–must be a priority.

We can deter Russia, and if necessary defend against it, only by applying non-traditional methods of combat and by preparing for 21st-century war and threats. The development of Lithuania's defense industry and the transfer of experience from Ukraine is also one of the essential tasks.

Japan's Security Reset, Alliance Management, and Europe: A Conversation with Tomoyuki Yoshida

Tomoyuki Yoshida, Chief Executive Director at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, discusses Japan's defense buildup, extended deterrence, alliance politics with the United States, links with Europe and Lithuania, and the risks surrounding Taiwan. Questions by **Linas Kojala**.

Linas Kojala: *Japan is on course to raise defense spending to around 2 percent of GDP by early 2026. What are the primary drivers behind this shift? To what extent is it motivated by regional threat perceptions, alliance expectations, or domestic strategic rethinking?*

Tomoyuki Yoshida: The primary driver of Japan's decision to double its defense spending is the growing threat, as stipulated in the National Security Strategy adopted in 2022. Regional security environment, though, continues to deteriorate. China is proceeding with a rapid military buildup, including its nuclear arsenal. Maritime assertiveness in the East and South China Seas is intensifying. Large-scale military drills are often conducted around the Taiwan Strait and beyond. Chinese jet fighters intruded into Japanese territorial space, too. Aircraft carriers navigated into the Pacific Ocean across the island chains including Japan for the first time. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its military cooperation with North Korea further increase DPRK's threat to the region.

North Korea may have acquired technical assistance from Russia which may contribute to its military development program. North Korean soldiers learned modern warfare such as drone attacks, spoofing and electromagnetic wave tactics etc. through the battlefield experience in Russia. All these pose new existential threats.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Takaichi who took office in October 2025 decided to meet 2 percent of GDP target by the end of this fiscal year, moving up two years from the original plan of 2027. She also instructed the government and ruling party to examine amendment of the National Security Strategy and related documents. There is also growing public support for these moves.

Prime Minister Takaichi who took office in October 2025 decided to meet 2 percent of GDP target by the end of this fiscal year, moving up two years from the original plan of 2027. She also instructed the government and ruling party to examine amendment of the National Security Strategy and related documents. There is also growing public support for these moves.

These decisions came just before the visit of President Trump to Japan in late October. While the defense spending and national security policies are independently determined, the direction aligns with the U.S. expectation for Japan to bear more responsibilities. The 2 percent target reflected a benchmark by NATO.

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi of Japan with U.S. President Donald J. Trump during a summit meeting on 28 October 2025. Government of Japan.

While it is not a matter of numerical target but that of substantive capability to address deteriorating security environment, it is argued that 2 percent is not enough in near future.

Linas Kojala: *The global non-proliferation regime is under pressure, with North Korea advancing its arsenal and Iran complicating monitoring efforts. How do these developments shape Japan's security planning? Is the debate on Japan's own deterrence posture evolving?*

Tomoyuki Yoshida: Surrounded by countries possessing nuclear weapons, and facing multiple hotspots such as the Taiwan Strait, the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea, this region's security environment is the most serious in the world.

Preserving national security of the country heavily depends on the U.S. extended deterrence. However, amid deteriorating power balance, plus the shift of the U.S. defense priority, Japan should pursue fundamental strengthening of its own defense capabilities. While Japan forgoes its own nuclear arsenal, to address the rapid evolution of Chinese nuclear capabilities as well as development of North Korean weapons of mass destruction, Japan should drastically enhance deterrence

While Japan forgoes its own nuclear arsenal, in order to address to rapid evolution of Chinese nuclear capabilities as well as development of North Korean weapons of mass destruction, Japan should drastically enhance deterrence and response capabilities. By proactively fulfilling its own defense responsibilities, Japan aims to move away from the traditional "under the umbrella of the U.S." extended deterrence and toward a more equal and mature alliance relationship.

and response capabilities. By proactively fulfilling its own defense responsibilities, Japan aims to move away from the traditional “under the umbrella of the U.S.” extended deterrence and toward a more equal and mature alliance relationship, thereby improving the deterrence and response capabilities of the entire alliance.

The National Security Strategy of 2022 has specified the measures in this respect, including the possession of “counterstrike capabilities.” In accordance with the Defense Buildup Plan, the Japanese Self Defense Forces developed its own long-range standoff missiles and are examining the deployment planning.

Simultaneously, Japan is transforming the SDF’s command and control system to respond more seamlessly to diverse threats, including gray-zone situations. Three independent pillars of land, maritime and air forces are integrated under a single operational command. under the single operational command. The SDF further establishes cross-domain structure including cyber, outer space, and electromagnetic domains. Japanese SDF also promotes the establishment of a seamless joint response mechanism with the U.S. forces to explore more effective and coordinated operation between two forces.

Japan also extends close defense cooperation with like-minded countries in the region such as Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines to build bilateral and mini-lateral security arrangements. They are also U.S. allies and share similar security concerns. If these mini-lateral defense arrangements develop into a formation of a lattice-like network in the future, it will generate a robust security structure to supplement and enhance regional deterrent capabilities.

Linas Kojala: *President Trump’s autumn 2025 visit to Japan reaffirmed cooperation, but questions remain regarding burden-sharing and strategic priorities. How would you describe the current dynamics in the Japan–U.S. alliance? What are Japan’s core priorities in managing it going forward?*

Tomoyuki Yoshida: President Trump’s visit to Japan took place shortly after Prime Minister Takaichi took office. It was a golden opportunity for Japan to build personal trust between two leaders. It is widely assessed that the first encounter was quite successful

U.S. service members stationed in Japan, where around 53,000 U.S. troops are based. iv4quad / Flickr.

and substantial.

President and Prime Minister reaffirmed their recognition that the Japan–U.S. alliance is the foundation of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and agreed to elevate the alliance to "even greater heights." They also shared the importance of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept and strengthen the framework for regional cooperation. There is a general consensus of shared security priorities that the alliance should address.

As for the burden-sharing expectations of the U.S., the President appreciated the intention of Japan to drastically strengthen its defense capabilities and explanation of the independent decision made to achieve 2 percent of GDP defense spending target immediately. Both leaders agreed to advance a broad range of security cooperation in order to further enhance the deterrence and response capabilities of the Japan–U.S. Alliance. As a result, the burden-sharing aspect did not become an outstanding subject of the discussion.

On the other hand, there were various concrete outcomes in the field of economic security and economic cooperation. They reaffirmed the swift and continued efforts by both sides regarding the agreement on tariffs between two countries. Prime Minister and President signed a document on critical minerals and rare earths which promotes secure and resilient supply of strategic materials through mining and processing. They also concurred to strengthen economic security initiatives, including critical technologies such as AI and shipbuilding as well as critical minerals and rare earths. Economic security policies are also main priorities of Takaichi government.

Linas Kojala: *U.S. intelligence assessments suggest that Beijing aims to ensure the PLA is capable of a Taiwan contingency by 2027, though capability does not necessarily imply intent. Do you see the risk of military confrontation increasing, and how is Japan preparing for potential scenarios?*

Tomoyuki Yoshida: U.S. intelligence assessments indicate that China aims to ensure the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is capable of reunification of Taiwan by 2027. This capability milestone,

however, does not inherently mean that Beijing has determined to carry out military aggression by a specific date.

China repeatedly emphasizes Taiwan is the most essential core interest. While the probability of contingency should not be overestimated, political resolve of Chinese leadership should not be underestimated.

China is rapidly expanding its military capabilities. They are holistic, including naval, amphibious, cyber, and space assets. China enacted the law to integrate coast guard vessels into military logistics. The PLA is conducting frequent, sophisticated military exercises around Taiwan, including simulated blockades and air and naval incursions.

While analysts recognize the risk of military confrontation grows as China's military buildup changes the power balance and its assertive behavior is getting provocative, they also stress that credible deterrence is most crucial to prevent the worst-case scenario. The essential core of such deterrence is U.S. commitment in this region.

Economic quarantine under the grey zone situation may cause serious disruption of critical supply chains, including energy, food and critical assets like semiconductors. Therefore, the recent Japan–U.S. leaders meeting opposed unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion and reiterated the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Japan has been primarily promoting diplomatic responses to outreach a number of likeminded counties including Europe while calling for China to solve the issue in peaceful manner without resorting the use of force.

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Linas Kojala: *Although geographically distant, Japan and Lithuania have strengthened ties based on democratic values. Where do you see the strongest areas of alignment, and why are these ties strategically important today between European and Asian countries?*

Tomoyuki Yoshida: Japan and Lithuania share basic universal values such as democracy, human rights and freedom of expression. Both countries also commit to a rule-based international order.

Based upon this shared trust, Lithuania and Japan established Strategic Partnership in 2022. Under the partnership, substantial cooperation and dialogue have been conducted.

Security: As both Lithuania and Japan are neighbors of Russia, security perceptions of the severe geopolitical environment are quite similar. Strategic dialogue is mutually beneficial. As likeminded countries, both countries also collaborate by carrying out sanctions on Russia and extending substantial support to Ukraine.

Economy: Both countries deepen economic ties through trade, investment, tourism, innovation, and agricultural products. Sustainable energy security of Lithuania is a promising area of collaboration.

Culture and history: The legacy of Chiune Sugihara is a strong foundation of friendship between two countries. People-to-people exchanges are expanding including at the local and grassroots levels. Lithuania graciously participated in Kansai Osaka Expo this year and many Lithuanian high-level persons paid official visits to Japan.

Lithuania is a trusted partner for Japan to jointly promote reinforcement of multilateralism and global governance. Japan appreciates Lithuanian support and understanding of Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept.

Lithuania and Japan also share the perspective of close linkage between the security of the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific. To respond to the common challenges, particularly inspired by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine,

Lithuania is a trusted partner for Japan to jointly promote reinforcement of multilateralism and global governance. Japan appreciates Lithuanian support and understanding of Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept.

Ukrainian personnel conducting demining operations in Kharkiv Oblast.
Main Directorate of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine in Kharkiv Oblast.

both countries should deepen strategic communication communication at all levels.

Linas Kojala: *Japan's decision to send officers to Lithuania for demining training in support of Ukraine signals an evolution in its security role. Why does the future of European security, and Ukraine's outcome in particular, matter for Japan's long-term strategic interests?*

Tomoyuki Yoshida: Japanese government announced that Japan will dispatch Ground Self-Defense Force's officers to Lithuania and conduct demining training to Ukrainian soldiers.

This is a part of a Demining Capability Coalition of Ukraine Defense Contact Group. At the same time, this initiative is an implementation of Japan–Lithuania strategic partnership initiated in 2022. The presence of SDF officers s still at a modest level but it is expected that the SDF will learn and bring back their experience in Vilnius for further consideration of future expansion of missions. Demining is essential for reconstruction of Ukraine and Japan pledges itself to play a critical role in the recovery of the country once the situation is ready.

The future of European security and the outcome of the war in Ukraine substantially matter for Japan's strategic interests because Japan views security in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions as closely interconnected. If the war is terminated in favor of the unlawful invader, it further undermines already precarious rule-based international order. It will also set a dangerous precedent that could encourage similar aggressive actions elsewhere on the globe. This is Japan's serious concern. Therefore, former Prime Minister Kishida expressed that "Today's Ukraine may be tomorrow's Asia."

Linas Kojala: *What developments in global politics will you be watching most closely in 2026? Which trends or decisions are likely to shape*

the next phase of the regional and international security environment?

T**omoyuki Yoshida:** The year of 2025 may be remembered as a historical turning point of global order in distant future. Post-war rule-based liberal international order is seriously shaken. The superpower which has founded and advocated the present international order does not wish to maintain it and rather desires to reshape. Geopolitical competition and rise of economic security will continue to be a notable current in 2026. International society will be more fragmented and multilateral global architectures will almost stand still. "Peace through strength" lingers on as primal behavior in international conflicts. Weaponization of economic dependence plays as effective leverage to achieve political objectives.

The consequence of the war in Ukraine is uncertain. Despite President Trump's enthusiasm, both Ukraine and Russia will not accept the present status-quo. Stalemate situation may continue, despite expectation. Completing four years since 2022, the West may struggle with protracted war fatigue. Solidarity and collective efforts are required to prevent slowdown of military and material support.

It is anticipated that the upcoming review of the U.S. National Defense Strategy is likely to place the highest security priority to the U.S. homeland and Western hemisphere. If so, substantial

The year of 2025 may be remembered as a historical turning point of global order in distant future. Post-war rule-based liberal international order is seriously shaken. The superpower which has founded and advocated the present international order does not wish to maintain it and rather desires to reshape.

U.S. military assets will be redeployed to the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific at the expense of existing U.S. forces deployed elsewhere.

The U.S.–China competition continues to be tense but both sides avoid direct collision and maintain managed coexistence. As a result of U.S.–China summit meeting in October, both sides mutually withdrew retaliatory measures such as additional tariffs and export restrictions on rare earths. Furthermore, President Trump is supposed to visit Beijing next spring. Given such economic truce, it is plausible that controversial issues like Taiwan will be low-profile. While the U.S. does not change its basic policy to Taiwan, China continues to raise pressure on Taiwan. Recent settlement revealed the limited effect of the reciprocal tariffs against the economic giant like China. U.S. tariff policy may be required to shift from holistic coverage to more targeted to specific critical sectors. Sectoral tariffs like pharmaceutical products and chips may pose different challenges and affect the allies and friends more severely. Strategic sectors like semiconductors, AI, rare earth and critical minerals, supply chain realignment will be further promoted for risk reduction.

Fragmentation of political parties is a common feature in many democracies. Populist and nationalist parties gain an electoral advantage by provoking electorates with anti-immigration or protectionist rhetoric. Taking advantage of this vulnerability in democracy, adversary states will wage cognitive warfare by spreading disinformation.

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Europe and Asia in a Time of Uncertainty: A Conversation Between Dr. Lee Sungwon and Dr. Konstantinas Andrijauskas

Europe and Asia are facing many of the same pressures today. War, rising military budgets, new regional alignments, and uncertain great-power leadership are reshaping how states think about security. In a recent conversation, Dr. Lee Sungwon of the Sejong Institute and Dr. Konstantinas Andrijauskas of the Geopolitics and Security Studies Center shared their views on how these forces are reshaping cooperation between South Korea and Europe. Their exchange circled around three main themes: Europe's renewed defense buildup and its meaning for the Indo-Pacific, and the ambiguous policy of the U.S.

Europe Rearms, and the Indo-Pacific Matters

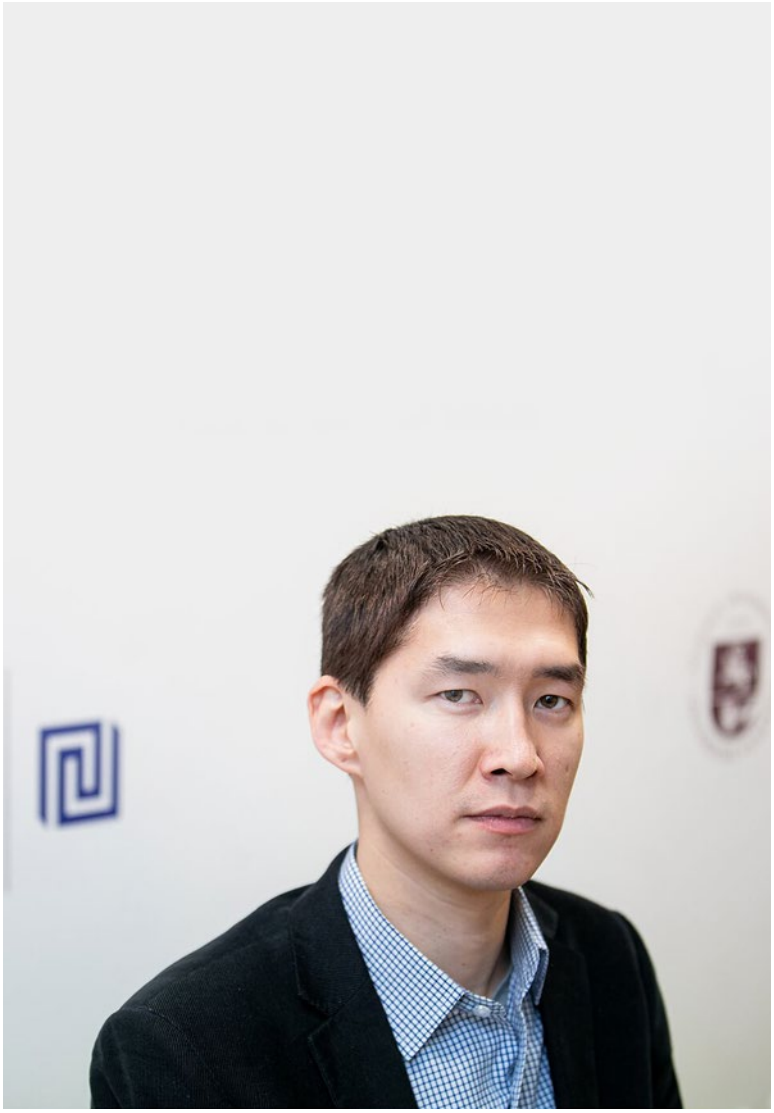
Dr. Lee noted that Europe is in the middle of a major shift. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, "Europe's security environment has become increasingly complex," and European states now feel a stronger need to defend themselves and invest in military readiness. The European Union's "Readiness 2030" initiative signals long-term planning rather than just short-term response. But this raises a question: Will Europe still stay engaged in the Indo-Pacific, a region where European views have become more active in recent years?

For the past half decade, European governments have sent ships to the region, taken part in exercises, and released Indo-Pacific guidelines describing the region as strategically important. Yet Dr. Lee pointed out that much of this activity has been limited and mostly symbolic. Many missions focused on piracy patrols and humanitarian roles rather than sustained military presence. As he put it, "Europe's military presence in the Indo-Pacific has never been substantial enough to change China's calculus."

Dr. Lee pointed out that much of this activity has been limited and mostly symbolic. Many missions focused on piracy patrols and humanitarian roles rather than sustained military presence. As he put it, "Europe's military presence in the Indo-Pacific has never been substantial enough to change China's calculus."

However, he suggested that cooperation may shift toward defense industry, supply chains, and joint production. The Indo-Pacific now accounts for roughly one-fifth of global defense spending, and Lee described the region as "a growing opportunity for cooperation" rather than a distant arena. South Korea and Europe share similar threat concerns and a need to diversify defense production. This gives real ground for partnership, especially with countries like Poland and Lithuania.

Dr. Andrijauskas agreed and pointed to the recent South Korea–Poland defense partnership as evidence that cooperation can expand quickly when strategic needs align.



Konstantinas Andrijauskas, one of Lithuania's leading researchers on China. LRT.

Russia, China, and North Korea: A Tightening Triangle

Both scholars expressed concern at the closer coordination among Russia, China, and North Korea. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has revealed a new level of cooperation: Russia turning to North Korean artillery and missiles, China helping Russia economically and diplomatically, and all three standing together in their broader opposition to the West.

But Dr. Lee was clear about the limits of outside influence. "Neither Europe nor South Korea possesses sufficient leverage to create a meaningful distance among them," he said. Even when countries share concerns, they do not always share a strategy. Within Europe, some states see China as a direct security challenge; others still see it as an economic partner.

This makes it difficult to send one consistent message to Beijing or Pyongyang. Dr. Andrijauskas added that Russia's war in Ukraine is at the heart of how this alignment develops. If Russia succeeds or even maintains its current occupied territories, it will reinforce authoritarian confidence in other regions. What once felt like separate regions now feel directly linked. As he put it, "How many people expected that we would have North Korean troops less than a thousand kilometers from where we sit now [in Vilnius]?" – referring to North Korean personnel aiding Russia.

If Russia succeeds or even maintains its current occupied territories, it will reinforce authoritarian confidence in other regions. What once felt like separate regions now feel directly linked.

For both scholars, the key response is not to try to break the alignment, but to strengthen cooperation among democratic partners themselves: clearer deterrence, better coordination, and political steadiness.

An Unpredictable United States and the Case for Closer Korea–Europe Ties

The third theme was the uncertainty surrounding American foreign policy. The U.S. remains the most important security partner for both Europe and South Korea. Yet the direction of U.S. strategy is less predictable today than in the past.

Joint Security Area in the Korean Demilitarized Zone, looking north from South Korea. U.S. Army / Edward N. Johnson.

American experts argue that decisions in the U.S. now often hinge more on individual leadership style than on a stable long-term strategy. He noted that former President Donald Trump placed considerable emphasis on personal diplomacy with Russia's Vladimir Putin, yet such attempts did not change Russia's actions.

According to Dr. Lee, American experts argue that decisions in the U.S. now often hinge more on individual leadership style than on a stable long-term strategy. He noted that former President Donald Trump placed considerable emphasis on personal diplomacy with Russia's Vladimir Putin, yet such attempts did not change Russia's actions. The U.S. stance on China, he added, also remains ambiguous and difficult to read. This, he said, "was very disappointing," because it pointed to a lack of consistent strategic planning.

Unpredictability does not mean abandonment. Both South Korea and Europe still rely on the U.S. But it does mean that middle powers must prepare to rely more on themselves and on one another. South Korea has already increased defense spending and widened its security role. Central and Northern European states are doing the same. In this sense, closer ties between Europe and South Korea are not just possible – they are practical.

One promising area is cyber and undersea infrastructure protection, where both regions face constant pressure. Lee noted that South Korea experiences daily hacking attempts from North Korea: "Every week, I get a call saying I've been hacked and need to change something." Lithuania, too, has faced cyberattacks, airspace pressure, and disinformation attempts. These are areas where cooperation can be built immediately, without waiting for grand strategy.

Conclusion

Europe and Asia may be far apart, but their security challenges are increasingly connected. Both face revisionist neighbors, shifting alliances, and uncertain signals from the world's leading power. What Dr. Lee and Dr. Andrijauskas made clear is that cooperation is no longer a diplomatic slogan – it is a practical necessity shaped by shared reality.

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