

The Vacuum of Indecision: Western Policy at a Crossroads

The Western policy of strategic ambiguity—a deliberate avoidance of clear communication and decisive action on key geopolitical issues—usually aims to deter conflict and maintain flexibility for diplomatic maneuvering. However, recently, this approach has increasingly backfired, creating uncertainty among allies and adversaries alike. Rather than preventing escalation, it has emboldened authoritarian regimes to exploit the resulting policy void, capitalizing on confusion and inaction. This indecision has left crises to fester, providing openings for regimes such as Russia, China, and Iran to assert themselves globally.

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Western nations and institutions have often disguised their inability to achieve consensus by persistently delaying decision-making. The inefficient

handling of crises in Ukraine and Georgia underscores the consequences of this vacuum. As the ongoing war in Ukraine reshapes the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical landscape, the flaws in ambiguous Western strategy are starkly apparent, demanding a critical reassessment. Georgia has become a recent example of authoritarian regimes exploiting Western ambiguities.

Redefining the Euro-Atlantic Security Posture

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has profoundly reshaped security perceptions across the Euro-Atlantic region, underscoring the imperative for NATO and EU member states to bolster their defense capabilities. The war was pivotal in prompting nations to reassess their military expenditures and strategic postures. In response to the heightened threat from Russia, several European countries have significantly increased their defense budgets. For ex-



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ample, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government has proposed [expanding](#) the Bundeswehr to 230,000 troops, up from the current target of 203,000, as part of NATO's efforts to strengthen Allied forces. At the same time, Poland nearly [doubled](#) its military spending from USD 15 billion to USD 27 billion in 2023. Substantial increases indicate a collective acknowledgment of the need to strengthen military capabilities in light of the ongoing war. With the incoming Trump presidency, the pressure on Europe will likely mount on increasing defense spending even further.

Despite the surge in defense expenditures, strategic ambiguity continues to pervade Western defense and security policies. This ambiguity manifests in indecisiveness in decision-making and inconsistent policy implementation. Persistent variations in threat perception and political appetite among member states have led to fragmented

approaches, diluting the overall strategic coherence of the alliance. Prolonged deliberations and lack of consensus have delayed critical decisions, undermining the effectiveness of the increased defense budgets. Such indecisiveness hampers the West's ability to respond promptly and effectively to security challenges in the face of the most pressing and severe crises.

Despite Russia's strategic failure in Ukraine and the exposure of significant weaknesses in its military apparatus, the Western policy of strategic ambiguity has remained largely unchanged. Three main factors contribute to this continued indecisiveness.

First, Russia's effective manipulations of the information space, including disinformation campaigns and psychological warfare, have succeeded in scaring various segments of Western societies.

These efforts pressure policymakers to adopt passive and defensive stances favorable to Russia as they seek to avoid domestic unrest and political fallout fueled by manipulated public perceptions.

Second, Russia's ability to escalate and use force, particularly its nuclear posturing, still effectively deters many European countries from taking bold steps against Russian aggression. The fear of provoking a larger confrontation, including the possibility of nuclear escalation, constrains Western decision-making despite Russia's demonstrated impotence.

Third, decades of defense cuts across Europe have left militaries and defense industries in a deplorable state, unable to meet the demands of a large-scale crisis. Rebuilding these capabilities cannot be achieved overnight; most European militaries are unlikely to be prepared for robust self-defense for at least four to five years. This acknowledgment of their vulnerabilities, lack of readiness to face a direct crisis, and [overreliance](#) on US military power contribute significantly to the ongoing policy ambiguity and hesitation.

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Ukraine's resilient defense has highlighted operational setbacks within the Russian military, diminished Moscow's regional influence, and increased the potential of neighboring countries to resist coercion. However, the persistence of indecisiveness and fragmented approaches in Western strategy undermines the effectiveness of these investments, missing an opportunity to capitalize on Russia's vulnerabilities and reinforce regional security architectures.

Russia's Expanding Influence Before and After the Invasion of Ukraine

Before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia systematically expanded its influence across the post-Soviet space and beyond through a coercive hybrid warfare strategy, aggression, and destabilization. Exploiting the West's indecisive and ambiguous responses to its aggressive actions, Moscow [leveraged](#) protracted conflicts and political deception to assert control over its neighbors.

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Another case illustrating Russia's successful manipulation of conflicts is the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite decades of Western mediation efforts, Russia maintained control of the situation on the ground.

During the 2020 escalation, Moscow brokered a ceasefire on its terms, ultimately stationing its peacekeepers in Azerbaijan while tightening its grip on Armenia even more. Similarly, in Belarus, the West's failure to decisively support the pro-democracy opposition during the 2020 protests allowed Russia to reinforce Alexander Lukashenko's regime, further consolidating its influence.

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These victories and the consistent failure of the Western policy of strategic ambiguity convinced Moscow that the ground was prepared for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia believed it could reestablish its sphere of exclusive influence in its so-called "near abroad," significantly advancing its vision of regional dominance. One of the primary variables in Russia's decision to launch its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was its confidence that the West was unprepared to intervene decisively or meaningfully assist Ukraine. Moscow calculated that the West's fragmented approach and delayed responses would allow it to achieve its goals without facing significant opposition. This (mis)calculation by Moscow is the most unmistakable evidence that strategic ambiguity and Western indecisiveness did not dissuade Russia but instead provoked its aggression.

A Turning Point: Russia Confronted by Real Opposition

In February 2022, Russia faced significant and organized resistance to its aggression for the first time in recent history, save Georgia's five-day-long effort to hold its military in August 2008. Ukraine's heroic defense, supported by Western

military aid, led to a strategic disaster for Russia. Moscow failed to achieve any of its objectives in Ukraine, exposing deep vulnerabilities in its military and political strategies. The consequences of this failure reverberated across the region, triggering a domino effect that undermined Russia's influence in multiple areas.

Azerbaijan, with Türkiye's support, regained control over Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia, disillusioned by Russia's inability to assist during the conflict, began pivoting westward, revising decades of dependency on Moscow. Russia's efforts to install pro-Russian leadership in Moldova and Romania through disinformation and covert influence campaigns have largely failed, signaling the limits of its hybrid strategies in resilient states. In Moldova, the election of pro-European president Maia Sandu dealt a blow to Moscow's ambitions, with her government actively reducing Russian influence and pursuing EU integration. Similarly, strong public support for NATO and the EU in Romania thwarted Kremlin-backed attempts to sway the political landscape.

As the ripple effects of its failures in Ukraine extended beyond the region, Russia's influence in Syria also collapsed in December 2024, with Moscow compelled to diminish its military presence – a cornerstone of its regional influence in the Middle East. These setbacks, failures, and degrading influences highlight a growing resistance to Russian interference as Russia remains fully consumed by its war in Ukraine, which has strained its capacity to maintain or expand its influence. The erosion of Russia's power and prestige underscores the impact of confronting its aggression with clear opposition and force for the first time. However, the Western policy of strategic ambiguity is still well in place. These developments have not necessarily resulted in improved or more effective Western policies, leaving the longer-term dynamics of Russian influence uncertain.

The Deficiencies of Western Strategic Ambiguity in Ukraine

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Three years into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the West still lacks a clear and unified objective in its support for Kyiv. Western leaders have failed to explicitly define whether assistance aims to help Ukraine resist Russian aggression indefinitely or to achieve victory. This ambiguity has left a critical question unanswered: What would victory for Ukraine and the West look like? Western efforts remain reactive and fragmented without clearly articulated goals, undermining their overall effectiveness. The European Union, in particular, has struggled to demonstrate unity with member states like Hungary and Slovakia, frequently sabotaging collective decisions and echoing Russian narratives. This internal discord weakens the EU's ability to present a strong, cohesive front against Russia and hinders effective, coordinated support for Ukraine, further exacerbating the lack of strategic clarity.

On the other hand, Trump's special envoy Keith Kellogg's proposed peace plan, [suggesting](#) granting Ukraine security guarantees in exchange for delaying NATO membership and accepting Russia's temporary control over the occupied territories. This is another example of strategic ambiguity, which has so far proven disastrous. While this may offer a temporary pathway toward stability, the ambiguity surrounding security guarantees jeopardizes the whole plan. The plan's inherent contradiction lies in sidelining NATO while offering alternative guarantees that are neither clear nor can they be more credible than the already [violated](#) Budapest Memorandum. This raises the ques-

tion: why should NATO's guarantees be excluded if other equally credible guarantees are being provided? Moreover, the proposal seems to contradict Ukraine's interests and also fails to align with Russia's declared objectives, making it difficult to envision how this approach could lead to sustainable peace or even be implemented in the medium run.

This lack of clarity creates a core problem for strategic planning. Defense planners can only devise actionable strategies, allocate resources, and identify necessary tools when they know precisely what needs to be achieved. The absence of clear objectives explains why decisions about providing specific weapon systems and determining the conditions for their application have been slow and fraught with political and financial challenges, especially in the EU and its member states. This prolonged decision-making weakens Ukraine's ability to defend itself effectively and disrupts its counteroffensive potential.

Moreover, Russia and other authoritarian regimes have weaponized this ambiguity to pollute the global information space with disinformation and propaganda. Through targeted campaigns, these regimes have sown divisions within NATO and EU societies, fracturing public opinion on supporting Ukraine. These divisions in public discourse translate into political disagreements, which delay critical support packages and erode Ukraine's defensive capabilities over time. Beyond the West, this disinformation has also diminished support for Ukraine on the global stage, particularly in regions such as South Asia and Africa, which do not necessarily align with the Western world. In these regions, Russia's narrative often portrays the conflict as a proxy war driven by Western interests, further undermining Ukraine's position and complicating efforts to build a broader coalition of support. Because of the ambiguity, Western support to Ukraine was never on time and never enough to repel Russian aggression and lay the foundation for lasting peace.

Connecting Ukraine's Uncertainty to Georgia's Crisis

The deficiencies of Western strategic ambiguity in Ukraine resonate powerfully in Georgia. While Russia faces significant setbacks and strategic failures post-2022, it still managed to exploit the protracted war, destruction, and human suffering in Ukraine to tighten its grip on Georgia. This underscores the interconnected nature of Western indecision and Russia's ability to adapt and exploit that vulnerability. Russian disinformation narratives, actively [supported](#) by the Georgian Dream (GD) regime on a local level, have capitalized on Georgian society's terrifying memories of the Russian invasion in 2008. These narratives leverage the trauma of past conflict, directly threatening another military confrontation similar to the one unfolding in Ukraine should Georgia align itself with Western interests and values. This tactic not only sows fear and hesitation within Georgian society but also undermines the country's pro-Western aspirations, effectively serving Russia's strategic objective of isolating Georgia from the West without overt military action.

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the Georgian Dream's regime exemplifies a broader struggle between Western and Russian influences. Strengthening authoritarian rule in Georgia is not merely a domestic issue but a regional challenge with profound implications for Black Sea security and broader Western strategic interests. The West's failure to articulate a clear strategy for Ukraine has enabled Russia to double down on its hybrid warfare tactics in Georgia, further destabilizing the region.

A striking example of Western indecisiveness is its response to the severe crisis following Georgia's highly [contested](#) elections. Despite thousands of documented [cases](#) of election manipulation collected by domestic and international observers, the West failed to unambiguously declare the elections neither free nor fair or call for a rerun. Nearly all complaints from watchdog organizations were baselessly dismissed by Georgia's courts, further proving the extent of the rigging. Yet, Western countries and institutions maintained an ambiguous stance, often citing procedural justifications.

Another glaring example of Western hesitation is the process of sanctioning those responsible for election rigging and human rights violations in Georgia. Georgia's pro-democracy political spectrum and civil society repeatedly called for a clear Western response to the rapid democratic rollback, but their pleas have largely been met with symbolic measures. Nearly a month after the contested elections, the EU and a few member states implemented sanctions that are largely symbolic, failing to deliver the strong response demanded by the gravity of the crisis. While the UK and the US eventually sanctioned five and two officials, respectively, these actions targeted only a small number of individuals responsible for violence against protesters, leaving the broader system of authoritarian consolidation untouched. Concrete, actionable steps that could deter further democratic erosion and violence remain absent.

The lack of coordination and decisive political resolve is most evident in the Western sanctioning process. Hungary and Slovakia vetoed the consensus on individual sanctions against the Georgian Dream regime representatives during the EU Foreign Affairs Council meetings, effectively blocking a unified European response. This obstruction underscores the challenges of achieving collective action within the EU when member states prioritize their domestic political agendas or maintain ties with authoritarian actors. In contrast, only the three Baltic states—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—[demonstrated](#) a unified stance by putting forward a coordinated list of targeted sanctions. This effort could serve as a guiding example for other EU member states, showcasing the importance of swift and aligned actions in addressing democratic backsliding.

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The recent [decision](#) by the United States to sanction Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party, marks a significant step in addressing his role in enabling Russian influence and undermining Georgia's democratic development. Sanctioned under a package targeting individuals and entities aiding Russia's war effort, this move underscores the growing recognition of Ivanishvili's outsized influence on Georgian politics and his regime's alignment with Kremlin interests. While this action is a crucial signal, it remains only a first step. To ensure real impact, sanctions must be expanded to target Ivanishvili's inner circle and sprawling business empire, which underpins his political and financial power. Escalating sanctions to include key allies, financial institutions, and offshore assets linked to Ivanishvili could amplify the pressure, disrupting the eco-

nomical foundations of his influence and sending a stronger message about the consequences of undermining democratic principles and facilitating Russian aggression. Without this escalation, the sanctions risk being largely symbolic, falling short of the transformative effect needed to curb his grip on Georgia's political landscape.

The broader picture remains fragmented. While the sanctions imposed by the US and the UK are significant, they lack synchronization with the logic applied by the Baltic states and fail to form part of a cohesive Western strategy. This piecemeal approach undermines the potential effectiveness of sanctions as a deterrent and signals a troubling lack of urgency in addressing the Georgian Dream regime's authoritarian practices. Without a unified and robust Western response, the Georgian government is emboldened to continue its democratic rollback, further aligning itself with Russia's geopolitical interests.

Pro-democracy Georgians—civil society leaders, opposition parties, and citizens protesting in the streets for over a month—have been imploring Western partners for decisive action, warning that the country is teetering into a deeper crisis by the day. They argue that the processes underway are nearing a point of no return, requiring urgent and substantial Western intervention to preserve democracy and stability. Yet, the West's ambiguous and fragmented response has emboldened authoritarian actors within Georgia and strengthened Russia's leverage in the region, further destabilizing an already fragile Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

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Russia's strategic failures have created a unique opportunity for the West to reassert influence in the region, yet this requires decisive policies that go beyond symbolic gestures. Georgia's geopolitical significance as a critical hub for East-West connectivity and a counterweight to Russian aggression cannot be overstated. However, the ongoing escalation of authoritarian rule in Georgia provides Russia and its allies with opportunities to bypass sanctions, launder money, and pursue aggressive agendas, undermining Western influence in the region.

The Cost of Strategic Ambiguity

Thousands of Georgians are risking their lives and their futures to defend democracy and the country's European aspirations. Yet, the EU and other Western powers remain hesitant, offering little more than statements of concern.

As Russia wages an all-out war of attrition in Ukraine and conducts an unprecedented hybrid assault on Georgia, the Western policy of strategic ambiguity is proving devastating not only for these countries but also for the West's broader strategic interests in the Black Sea region and beyond. Thousands of Georgians are risking their lives and their futures to defend democracy and the country's European aspirations. Yet, the EU and other Western powers remain hesitant, offering little more than statements of concern. This inaction sends a dangerous signal: the West is unwilling or unable to act decisively when democratic values and regional stability are under direct assault.

Sanctions, for example, must be used as a preventive tool rather than a post-factum punishment. Imposing sanctions after irreparable damage has been done is ineffective. This mistake was made in the case of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus,

and there is a risk of it being repeated in Georgia. Sanctions targeting key figures such as Bidzina Ivanishvili should be implemented now while they can still compel free and fair elections and prevent the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Waiting until Georgia crosses the point of no return will render sanctions meaningless and further erode the West's credibility in supporting democracy and stability.

The situation in Ukraine similarly underscores the dangers of strategic ambiguity. Proposals to revert to a pre-2022 pattern, such as pressuring Ukraine into a ceasefire and negotiating with Russia without clear terms for victory, would only reinforce Russia's belief that aggression pays off. Allowing the conflict to devolve into a war of attrition risks returning to a dynamic where Moscow regains the upper hand. Such an approach would not only devastate Ukraine's future but also embolden Russia and its allies to continue destabilizing wider European security.

A proactive strategy should immediately replace the strategic ambiguity hindering the West's response in Ukraine and Georgia. The crises in these two countries are not isolated; they are deeply interconnected. The West must recognize this link and confront Russian aggression with a unified and decisive strategy in both countries. Failing to act decisively in Georgia would further enable Russian expansionism and undermine the West's long-term security interests in Ukraine, the Black Sea region, and beyond.

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Preventive action is not just an option; it is a vital necessity. Imposing sanctions on key decision makers and primarily on Bidzina Ivanishvili, pre-

emptively supporting democratic movements with tangible resources, and clearly communicating the West's commitment to countering Russian aggression is critical. If the West waits for irreversible damage to occur, it risks losing its credibility and

the geopolitical balance that sustains Euro-Atlantic security. The time to act decisively is now—before strategic ambiguity allows the situation in Georgia, Ukraine, and the wider Black Sea region to spiral further out of control ■