ATLAS PROTOCOL

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE / EUROPEAN SECURITY

EUROPE'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY GAP

Ukraine, American Dependency and the Contest for Influence over Europe's Security Order

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EXECUTIVE ASSESSMENT

Principal finding. Europe's central problem is not a lack of declared support for Ukraine. It is the gap between its security responsibilities and its ability to exercise independent negotiating leverage. Recent consultations demonstrate European involvement, but they do not yet establish assured European co-ownership of the eventual negotiating format.

Analytical qualification: This assessment separates verified events, structural interpretation and conditional scenarios. Leaders' intentions are not presented as established facts. Information cut-off: 25 October 2026.

Key findings

- Not total exclusion: the EU and several European partners participated in preparatory consultations in Oslo on 20 October. That does not guarantee a formal place in subsequent decisive rounds. [1][2]
- Neutrality is the wrong test: an impartial mediator and an interested negotiating stakeholder perform different roles. Europe need not claim neutrality to defend its own commitments.
- The capability gap is material: higher defence expenditure does not instantaneously remedy shortfalls in joint action, critical enablers, industrial delivery and political decision-making. [3][4]
- Two clocks: diplomatic choices can be made in weeks while Europe's defence-readiness horizon extends to 2030. [4]
- Warning signal: if outside actors can negotiate material European obligations without firm European negotiating rights, implementation burdens may outpace decision-making influence.

Central thesis

Europe may understand its dependence but cannot transform that awareness into autonomous operational leverage quickly enough. The decisive question is not simply who is in the room, but who sets the agenda, establishes the terms, controls implementation and possesses credible alternatives.

01 | Context and verified baseline

In October 2026, diplomatic contacts intensified around a possible resumption of talks between Ukraine and Russia. Consultations took place in Oslo on 20 October involving Ukrainian, American and European participants; on 21 October US envoy Steve Witkoff met Vladimir Putin in Saint Petersburg. A technical trilateral meeting was discussed for November, but its final format and outcome remained uncertain at the cut-off. [1][2][5]

The portrayal of Europe as entirely absent is too sweeping: reporting on Oslo identifies European national security advisers, the EU and NATO among participants. Their specific status in a subsequent decisive phase, however, was not guaranteed. [1][2]

The European Council affirmed on 15–16 October that Europe must play a central role in a future peace settlement, that Ukraine must decide its own future and that the Union would defend its

interests. These are political commitments; their conversion into effective negotiating influence must be assessed separately. [6]

02 | The wrong criterion: neutrality

Russia's unwillingness to view European actors as neutral is understandable as a description of its position. Yet neutrality is not a universal prerequisite for participation in negotiations. A mediator facilitates agreement; a stakeholder negotiates over its interests, responsibilities, costs and guarantees. The United States is itself a strategic actor with distinct interests and instruments.

A durable settlement could engage European sanctions, reconstruction, market access, accession processes, defence production and security guarantees. A process addressing these matters without adequate European consent creates legitimacy and implementation risks. That does not entitle Europe to speak for Ukraine: Ukrainian sovereignty and consent remain independent requirements.

03 | Defining the Strategic Autonomy Gap

In this assessment, the Strategic Autonomy Gap means the difference between (a) the consequences and commitments Europe may have to bear and (b) the options Europe can independently, credibly and promptly deploy. It is a conceptual analytical framework, not a validated numerical index.

Dimension	Structural vulnerability	Strategic consequence
Military	Reliance on selected US enablers, including ISR, strategic lift, integrated defence and deterrence.	Negotiating room narrows when continuity of support or guarantees is contested.
Industrial	Capacity, stocks, interoperability and lead times cannot be scaled instantly.	Budget decisions produce deployable capability only after a lag.
Political	Divergent national threat assessments and decision structures.	A unified binding mandate and consistent negotiating line are harder to secure.
Diplomatic	A place in consultations does not ensure agenda control.	Influence over terms may trail Europe's share of implementation costs.

According to the European Defence Agency, EU member states spent €418 billion on defence in 2025, with €454 billion projected for 2026. Those figures indicate mobilisation, not automatic operational autonomy. [3]

04 | Strategic exploitation of dependence

Washington and Moscow possess different instruments of power and pursue different objectives. They do not need to coordinate to benefit separately from constraints on Europe. US control over certain critical security capabilities may affect European policy options; Russia may favour diplomatic formats in which European countervailing influence is less directly visible. These are plausible negotiating incentives, not evidence of a shared strategy.

The relevant observation is therefore not an assumed US–Russia alliance, but the asymmetry between European responsibilities and other actors' ability to shape timing, access and the negotiating framework.

05 | The two clocks

Short clock: diplomacy (weeks/months)	Long clock: autonomy (years)
Ceasefire arrangements, negotiating format, potential territorial and security guarantees, sanctions conditions.	Industrial expansion, interoperability, command capability, joint procurement and political reform.
Decisions may have immediate effects.	Europe's Readiness 2030 horizon explicitly recognises a multi-year build-up. [4]

This mismatch creates a transition exposure window: a period in which the need to act independently grows faster than autonomous capability becomes available. This is an analytical hypothesis to be monitored through observable indicators.

06 | Conditional scenarios: next 12–24 months

The scenarios below are potential paths rather than forecasts or probability estimates.

Scenario	Trigger / pathway	Implication for Europe
A | Coordinated transatlantic route	The US, Ukraine and European partners institutionalise consultations and boundaries around external agreements.	European input increases, although dependence on US enablers persists.
B | Transactional major-power format	Core terms emerge chiefly from Washington–Moscow–Kyiv contacts, with later European input.	Risk that influence remains below Europe's security responsibilities and implementation burden.
C | European negotiating capability	A joint European mandate, material capacity and autonomous diplomatic channels become more closely linked.	Greater ability to articulate independent conditions, resources and guarantees.
D | Fragmentation without breakthrough	Peace contacts stall and European capitals follow divergent approaches.	Higher fragmentation costs and reduced strategic predictability.

07 | Indicators for Atlas monitoring

The proposed indicators form a research agenda. They have not yet been weighted, calibrated or integrated into a live risk model.

Indicator	What to monitor	How to interpret
NEG-01 Formal participation	Is there an explicit EU mandate and a seat in formal rounds?	Separate briefing, consultation and decision rights.
NEG-02 Agenda influence	Who drafts proposals and defines red lines?	Agenda-setting matters more than ceremonial visibility.
SEC-03 Guarantees	Which states provide legally and operationally testable guarantees?	Measure credible implementation, not just statements.
CAP-04 Critical enablers	European ISR, air defence, strategic lift and command capacity.	Measure available deployable capability.
IND-05 Industrial delivery	Contracts → systems produced → deployment.	Track delivered output alongside budgets.
POL-06 Cohesion	EU decisions, national exceptions, joint procurement.	Shows capacity for sustained collective action.

FIN-07 Burdens and influence	Who pays, guarantees and defines conditions?	Detects gaps between obligations and decision rights.

08 | Decision implications

For European institutions and member states

- Separate the role of neutral mediator from that of indispensable negotiating stakeholder.
- Define jointly which European commitments require explicit European consent.
- Translate defence budgets into measurable output: delivery times, readiness, stocks, shared systems and critical enablers.
- Couple dialogue with Ukraine to credible European security and economic options.
- Judge diplomatic progress by substantive terms, guarantees and implementation rather than summit photographs.

For independent observers and decision-makers

Avoid two false extremes: portraying Europe as fully shut out or treating preparatory representation as proof of strategic control. Evaluate the space between them by tracking mandates, material guarantees and implementation capacity.

09 | Limitations, uncertainty and falsification

This assessment does not establish that European leaders are deliberately “buying time”, nor that US and Russian leaders share a coordinated plan to marginalise the EU. Both propositions would require additional primary evidence. The hypothesis of inadequate European leverage would weaken if a formal European mandate, direct negotiating access and demonstrable influence over agreed terms became observable.

Europe is not a single institutional actor. EU institutions, individual member states, European NATO allies and non-EU countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom exercise overlapping but distinct powers. “Europe” is used here as a strategic shorthand, not as the name of a unitary legal decision-maker.

10 | Final assessment

The Ukraine talks expose a structural European tension: Europe is central to the consequences of any peace, but its capacity to shape every condition of that peace independently is still developing. The analytical question is not whether leaders appear sufficiently assertive; it is whether available resources are converted into timely, credible and coordinated influence.

A stronger autonomous position need not entail an abrupt break with the United States. It requires transatlantic cooperation to become progressively less a product of unavoidable dependence and more a genuine strategic choice.

Sources and verification

[1] Norwegian Government / reporting on the Oslo consultations, 20–21 Oct 2026; EU involvement corroborated by Commission coverage: https://2eu.brussels/index.php/en/news/eu-joins-preparations-for-ukraine-peace-talks-as-oslo-meeting-focuses-on-territory-security-and-reconstruction

[2] Interfax-Ukraine, European Commission briefing, 21 Oct 2026: https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/1223895-amp.html

[3] European Defence Agency, EU defence spending 2025 and 2026 estimate, 16 Jul 2026: https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2026/07/16/eu-defence-spending---418-billion-in-2025--projected-to--454-billion-in-2026

[4] European Commission, White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence_en

[5] Axios, possible Russia–Ukraine trilateral talks, 21 Oct 2026: https://www.axios.com/2026/10/21/russia-ukraine-putin-witkoff-peace

[6] European Council, conclusions, 15–16 Oct 2026: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2026/10/15-16/

[7] Associated Press, obstacles to renewed talks, 24 Oct 2026: https://apnews.com/article/94e0aee5d56bcd164f8cbae0918ed1f8

Method note: Open-source analytical assessment. Sources and interpretations reflect information available through 25 October 2026. Scenarios do not constitute confirmed future events. This independent report is not an official position of the EU, NATO or Ukraine.