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Strategic Thinking

Negotiations on the Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis



● Other Important Stories

The Trump Government's Reciprocal Tariff Measure

The German Election & The CDU and the AFD

Factors Mattering to Syria's Future

Words from the Editor...

During the first quarter of 2025, numerous changes have taken place in the international political, economic, and security landscapes.

In the political area, the world has seen a return of “Trumpism”, with the U.S. President Donald Trump having started his second term since January. Besides that, the political environment in some European countries has undergone further changes, and against the backdrop of the rising influence of right-wing political forces across Europe, Germany held a new election in late February. In the Middle East, the Syrian interim government has opened a new chapter toward diplomatically engaging with various partners.

In the economic, business, and trade arena, the announcement of the U.S. government’s expanded tariff measures has brought new uncertainties to the global economic forecast.

On the security front, there have been some new developments related to the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as the war in the Middle East. There is a need to particularly mention that the Trump government so far has taken a different approach from the former U.S. administration toward managing the U.S.-Russia bilateral ties as well as handling the Ukraine crisis.

ISSUE 2 of the *Strategic Thinking* magazine has explored and analysed a range of important issues just mentioned above.

The weather is getting warmer. Trees are turning green, and flowers are blooming. Wish the readers a good Spring season!

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1. POLITICS AND DIPLOMACY

Negotiations on the Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis

Key Points

- The U.S. government has sought a policy shift toward engaging with Russia.
- The parties concerned over the past more than two months have shown their willingness to let diplomacy play a significant part in helping promote the settlement of the Ukraine crisis. Nevertheless, the warring parties will have to ensure the proper implementation of the consensus reached step by step in order to finally achieve an ideal outcome.
- For the final settlement of the Ukraine crisis, there could be a scenario that both Russia and Ukraine will not diplomatically recognize each other's territorial claims, even though in the meantime, Russia may have taken full physical control of the regions having previously voted to re-join Russia.

Since the U.S. President Trump assumed office in January, the U.S. government has taken a series of steps toward normalizing the U.S. relations with Russia and resolving the Russia-Ukraine conflict.



(L) Russian President Vladimir Putin; (R) U.S. President Donald Trump. Alexey Nikolskiy / Sputnik; Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images / RT.

Diplomatic Engagements between the U.S. and Russia and between the U.S. and Ukraine

Following a phone call between the U.S. President Trump and the Russian President Putin in February, a series of high-level meetings between Russian and U.S. officials had taken place respectively in Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The phone calls and high-level meetings had focused on discussions of normalizing U.S.-Russia bilateral ties including restoring the staff in the diplomatic missions of both countries, as well as of the possible means and procedures for addressing the Ukraine crisis.

Alongside the Russia-Ukraine war, U.S.-Russia relations over the past years has kept cooling down. Apparently, the Trump government has decided to take steps to change the trend of a worsening relationship with Russia. So far, the officials of the U.S. and Russia have valued positively of the diplomatic engagement between the two sides.



Reuters video. Watch the video, click [HERE](#).

Through the same period, for the U.S. engagement with Ukraine, following an intensive argument between the U.S. President Trump and the Ukrainian President Zelensky over their disagreements on the terms set in a minerals deal, which is waiting for further arrangement by the two sides, the U.S. government shortly suspended intelligence sharing and military aid to Ukraine. Then, after a high-level discussion between the American and Ukrainian officials in Saudi Arabia, the U.S. and Ukraine reached a consensus on a 30-day ceasefire, in exchange, the U.S. resumed intelligence and military support to Ukraine.

In response to the 30-day ceasefire proposal, the Russian President expressed support to it, yet in the meantime, also raised concern about the terms and conditions for implementing the ceasefire proposal.

Without defining the terms and conditions for implementing the ceasefire proposal, it would be hard to believe that both Russia and Ukraine will not use the ceasefire period to re-organize their forces - this would especially be the case for the Ukrainian side, given the current tough condition facing the Ukrainian military on the front lines.

The 30-day ceasefire is supposed to serve a purpose of immediately stopping the casualties on the battlefield, and also be taken as the first key step toward bringing the war to its final settlement. If either side tends to take the 30-day ceasefire as a chance to re-group their forces, more likely, the ceasefire proposal cannot be implemented and extended; in that case, there will be further and more casualties, should the truce be expired or broken.

The parties concerned will have to think about how to avoid this possible scenario.

In another phone conversation between the presidents of the U.S. and Russia on 18 March, the two leaders reached a consensus on immediately suspending the strikes on the energy infrastructures in Russia and Ukraine by both sides for 30 days; besides that, the two leaders discussed the possibility of implementing a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea, in addition to the swap of Russian and Ukrainian prisoners of war and other issues of mutual concern.

Shortly, in a phone call with the U.S. President, the Ukrainian President also agreed to mutually implement the consensus reached between the U.S. and Russian Presidents. Later, in a press conference, the Ukrainian President stated that “if Russia stops striking our targets, we will definitely stop hitting targets in Russia. But Putin’s promises alone are not enough, there must be control. The main subject of this control must be the US.”

Nevertheless, according to Russia’s Ministry of Defence, shortly after agreeing to the above just mentioned consensus, the Ukrainian side had broken this U.S.-mediated partial ceasefire deal by hitting an oil depot in Russia’s Krasnodar region on 19 March and a gas metering station in Sudzha on 21 March. Besides these two occasions, on 26 March, Russia’s Ministry of Defence reported that the Ukrainian side had made other series of attempts to attack the energy targets in Russia.



Cited from RT.

Generally, the parties concerned over the past more than two months have shown their willingness to let diplomacy play a part in helping promote the settlement of the Ukraine crisis. Nevertheless, the implementation of the energy ceasefire consensus hasn't been smoothly. The Russian side certainly will not allow Ukraine to keep breaking the consensus without a response. So, the warring parties will have to ensure the proper implementation of the consensus reached step by step in order to finally achieve an ideal outcome.

The negotiations among the parties haven't deeply touched on the most sensitive issues yet - territorial and security arrangements for the settlement of the Russia-Ukraine war. At the current stage, the priority of the Trump government is to achieve a full ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine; and for reaching this goal, the U.S. officials have been attempting to promote and implement a series of partial ceasefires including the ceasefire of mutually halting the strikes on energy targets in Russia and Ukraine, and a possible maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea.

The further advancement of the Russian forces on the battlefield and the pressure imposed by U.S. on both Ukraine and Russia in the coming steps, accompanied by the functioning of diplomacy, could finally get the warring parties to achieve and implement a full ceasefire - this should just be a timing issue. During this process, the role played by the U.S. would matter very significantly in affecting how long the Russia-Ukraine war could further last, as without the U.S. aid and intelligence support to Ukraine, it would be hard to think that Ukraine can afford to prolong the conflict without limit.

Possible Means and Scenario for the Final Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis

In order to reach and implement a full ceasefire agreement at an earlier date, the Trump government officials in the meantime may need to more clearly understand the deep concerns of the two direct warring parties, based on the recognition of which, to see whether the parties could jointly work out a solution.

At the moment, the Ukrainian side has no problem with the idea of a full ceasefire with Russia. Nevertheless, whether Ukraine is committed to implementing the ceasefire agreement should be another issue. Besides that, Ukraine is very concerned about whether Russia in the future would possibly launch another military operation. That's why Ukraine has kept requiring a U.S.-led special force to be sent to Ukraine. In this case, regardless of whether Ukraine would recognize Russia's territorial claims, for the final settlement of the Ukraine crisis, security guarantee should still be the number one priority for Ukraine.

Status of the Regions Controlled by Russia



As for Russia, it is not fundamentally against a full ceasefire proposal, yet Russia's immediate concern is that whether it would be the case that Ukraine diplomatically agrees a full ceasefire agreement, while at the same time, rearms Ukraine's military for preparing further attacks against Russia, given Ukraine's past records of having occasionally breached the country's commitment.

Apart from that, in a longer term, Russia would be critically concerned about the rights, heritage, and status of the people living in the regions having newly joined Russia since October 2022, including Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia. It is assumed that, no matter whether Ukraine would admit Russia's territorial claims to the four regions, Russia will tend to achieve full physical control of them, as only by doing so, the rights and interests of the people in these regions can be properly protected, from Russia's perspective.

To promote a full ceasefire and further a final settlement deal of the Ukraine crisis, the Trump government will have to think about how to properly manage and address the serious concerns of both Russia and Ukraine just mentioned above.

For addressing the matter of security guarantee for Ukraine. Previously, the U.S. officials had discussed the idea of getting European troops as peacekeepers dispatched to the contact line between Russian and Ukrainian forces as part of a final settlement deal. Russia had denied the possibility of allowing Western peacekeepers to approach the Russian border, as that would seriously threaten Russia's security from Russia's perspective. Following the latest round of negotiations between Russian and U.S. officials in Saudi Arabia, in an interview to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov conducted by Russia's Channel 1, he re-stated Russia's opposition to the idea of sending Western peacekeepers to Ukraine.

Under this circumstance, providing Ukraine with security guarantee by sending Western troops to the security zones along the contact line between Russia and Ukraine can hardly be achievable. The parties concerned will have to think about other means of offering security guarantee to Ukraine.

For instance, they may discuss whether the UN peacekeeping forces from non-NATO member countries can be sent to the security zones between Russia and Ukraine. Importantly, the size of the security zones, instead of covering two thousand kilometers contact line between Russia and Ukraine, has to be significantly narrowed down - let's say a few hundred kilometers. Regarding the specifics, the concerned parties need to negotiate.

As for addressing Russia's serious concerns, although security is also critical for the country, as far as Ukraine's NATO membership is being denied, territorial recognition of the newly integrated regions should be Russia's top priority. The Trump government officials have already noted that, for resolving the Ukraine crisis, the Ukrainian side will have to concede

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territories. Nonetheless, whether and to what level the Ukrainian side would agree to compromise the country's position on the territorial issue will be quite uncertain. Russia would expect the Trump government to help settle this matter through diplomatic means, while be ready to continue advancing the Russian forces on the front lines if diplomacy cannot work for Ukraine.

After all, addressing the security concerns for Ukraine and the territorial recognition issue for Russia is assumed to be the most critical and challenging step toward finally settling the Russia-Ukraine war.

Russia and Ukraine have been holding very controversial positions. For the final settlement of the Ukraine crisis, we cannot rule out a scenario that both Ukraine and Russia will not diplomatically recognize each other's territorial claims, even though in the meantime, Russia may have taken full physical control of the regions having previously joined Russia by holding referendums.

The German Election & The CDU and the AFD

Highlights

The two major German political parties, the CDU and the AFD, roughly share a similar position on tightening measures on immigration, taking steps to revive German's standing, as well as being committed to making Germany stronger and more independent in a longer term; while on issues related to military spending, Germany's relationship with both the EU and Russia, as well as the management of the Russia-Ukraine war etc., differences remain from various degrees between the two political parties.

On the 23 February German election, the right-wing political parties including the centre-right Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the far right Alternative for Germany (AFD) secured a better showing than other political parties, with the CDU finally winning over 28.6% of the votes, compared to the AFD's 20.8%, the Social Democratic Party's 16.4%, and the Green Party's 11.6%. The AFD achieved its best ever showing for a far-right party since World War II.

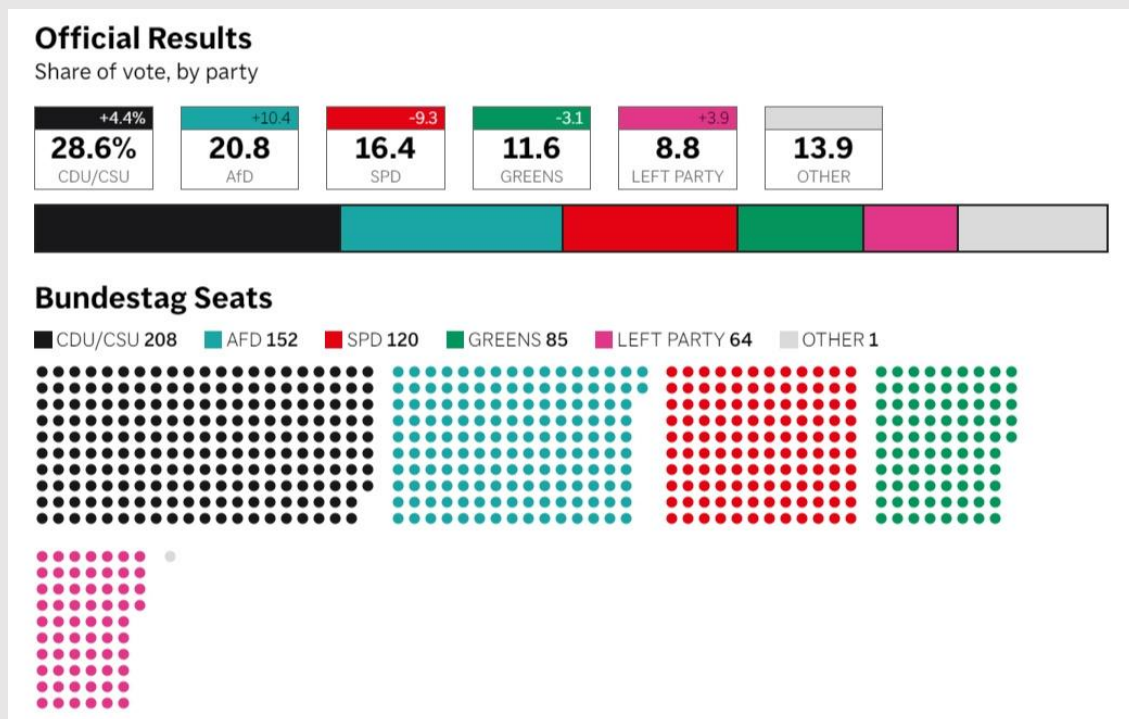


The CDU/CSU chairman Friedrich Merz and the Leaders of other German political parties show up on the national election day on 23 February 2025 after the election results coming out. (AP video by Fanny

Brodersen, production by Kerstin Sopke). Watch the video at the AP website, click this link [HERE](#).



AfD co-leaders Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla at party headquarters during parliamentary elections, Berlin, Germany, 23 February 2025. (Sean Gallup/Getty Images/RT).



Source: Federal Returning Officer

Credit: Parker Kaufmann, Humera Lodhi, Maya Sweedler. Cited from AP.

The election results reflected the dynamics of the German domestic political environment, the evolving public mood toward the political parties, and also what the German citizens have been more concerned about over the past few years - obviously, the German economy, energy and food prices, defence and security, Ukraine crisis, German national identity, the country's standing in Europe and beyond, as well as the problems led by immigration, have been some of the core concerning issues for the public; and these issues, in the meantime, have been occupying the agendas of the political parties. The election turnout rate was around 83.5%, the highest since the country's unification in 1990, showing that the German citizens were very active in expressing their concerns through this year's election.

This article will mainly tend to analyse a range of issues, to which, the political parties and the public have paid a lot of attention, and meanwhile compare the positions and views held by the two German political parties, the CDU and the AfD, on these issues.

The German Economy

In the economic field, the German economy had, for the first time since 2003, shrunk for two consecutive years in 2023 and 2024. Apparently, inflation hadn't led to a positive growth of the German economy. The unstable energy prices and supplies have not only affected numerous German companies but also the ordinary families.

For instance, according Verivox, though the energy prices have dropped, they still remain higher than the pre-war levels - an average three-person German household currently needs to spend €5,407 a year on energy, compared to the level of €4121 in 2021, up by 31%; and the spending on heating with oil and gas has surged by 35% and 74% respectively.

As for the impact of the rising energy costs on German companies, according to a survey jointly released by The Federation of German Industries (BDI) and the consulting firm Deloitte in Autumn 2023, 82% of the respondents took energy security and costs as one of the primary reasons that motivated them to invest in other countries, with a degree of either moderately, strongly, or very strongly (other important reasons consisting of lower labour costs, better market access/market growth, less bureaucracy/regulation and so on); in addition, by the time when the survey conducted, 67% of the German companies responded that they had already moved parts of their business operations abroad, and within two to three years, 66% of component production, 54% of pre-assembly, and 44% of production in general would likely be relocated.

Against the current situation facing various sectors of the German economy, winning the election by the CDU appeared to be reasonable. The CDU Chairman Friedrich Merz had been a business lawyer, and had also ever served as the supervisory board Chairman in the German

office of the asset management corporation, BlackRock. So, it is assumed that his experience of working in the business sector could have done him a favour and made a lot of German voters believe that Merz and his party should be in a better position to help deal with the problems facing the German economy.

During the election process, the CDU had announced a series of measures to help improve the country's economic situation including cutting corporate taxes to help eliminate the burden for companies, and reducing social spending etc..

To better deal with the challenges facing the German government in the economic area including stopping German companies from relocating their business operations, in addition to the policies and measures adopted at the domestic level, it is also very important for the government to see the root causes of the shrinking economy over the past few years from a foreign policy perspective. The interactive measures taken by European countries and Russia alongside the Russia-Ukraine war have dramatically affected the economic performance of Germany. The German government cannot avoid addressing this issue.

Immigration



People mourn the victims on 22 December 2024, near a Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany, where a man had driven a car into a crowd. (Annegret Hilse / Reuters / CNN).

Both the CDU and the AFD advocate adopting more strict measures in dealing with illegal immigration. The attack made by a Saudi-origin migrant before Christmas killed six in Magdeburg; and another attack conducted by an Afghan migrant in January in Aschaffenburg led to the death of two. These two incidents can only strengthen the positions of the CDU and the AFD on further tightening relevant measures on immigration.

The CDU had proposed two pieces of bills on immigration - one is binding and another one is non-binding; and with the support of the AFD, the CDU had managed to get through the non-binding measure. The CDU's cooperation with the AFD for passing this bill had drawn a lot of criticisms, as this move was considered having broken the "firewall" principle in German politics. In line with that, German mainstream political parties would deny the possibility of cooperating with any far-right political parties.

Compared to the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel's tenure, when the then German government had taken an open-door policy for receiving immigrants in the mid-2010s, apparently the CDU's position on the issue of immigration has shifted, at least for the time being.

Germany and the European Union

The CDU wants to see a stronger Germany and a stronger EU, and Germany will be a very important part of the bloc. One of Merz's priorities is to unify Europe, and deal with the challenges from Russia and the United States, though he did acknowledge that differences within the bloc will continue to emerge from time to time.

In comparison with the CDU, the AFD wants to have a more independent and stronger Germany, and to "make Germany great again", as Alice Weidel, co-leader of the AFD claimed at a campaign rally. For Germany's relationship with the EU, the AFD expects reintroducing the German national currency, and wants the bloc to be a looser association of European countries with more flexibility, though the AFD doesn't advocate withdrawing from the EU.

The German Identity and the Standing of Germany

Apart from vowing to revive the Germany economy, Merz also pledged to "rebuild Berlin's international standing for 'a Germany we can be proud of again'".

Meanwhile, the AFD highlights the importance of protecting the interests of Germany and German citizens.

The AFD has been evolving over the past years since its founding in 2013. It was formed by a group of professors and journalists, in response to the ramifications of the global financial crises to Germany. The party initially opposed the idea of abandoning the German currency, and advocated Germany's leaving from the Eurozone. Then, alongside the refugee crises occurred in the mid-2010s, addressing immigration also became a key issue for the AFD.

The followers of the AFD have been widely expanded and diversified over the past years. In the earlier days, the party had mostly drawn a large number of supporters from the eastern regions of Germany, which were generally less developed in contrast to the western parts of Germany.

Nowadays, in addition to the party's original supporting base in eastern Germany, the AFD has gathered supporters from across all parts of Germany and is represented in 14 of the 16 state legislatures; and just like the followers to other German political parties, the AFD's supporters are coming from a wide variety of age groups, education and professional backgrounds, and entities from across various parts of Germany. Younger voters are proved to be more attracted to the AFD - in the February election, 21% of young Germans aged between 18 and 24 voted for the AFD, increasing by 14 points than the 2021 election; while 13% of them at the same age group chose the CDU this time.

The rising influence of the AFD is no coincidence. It is against the backdrop of the shrinking German economy, rising costs for families and companies, and the declining standing of Germany in the European continent (even though Germany is still the largest economy in Europe, and the second largest military aid contributor to Ukraine behind the United States). So, the dynamics displayed in the economic, social, political, military, and security areas motivated numerous Germans to express their skepticism about the government's capacity in protecting the interests of the country and of the German citizens.

Defence, Transatlantic Relations, Russia, and Ukraine

The CDU plans to raise defence spending, increase the number of military servicemen from 180,000 to 203,000, and offer more support to the soldiers.

In relation to Germany's relations with the U.S., Merz expected to develop and maintain a strong transatlantic ties. Nonetheless, he also claimed to step by step achieve independence from the United States.

On Russia and Ukraine, Merz's position has no much difference from that of the current German government. Like some European officials, he supports Ukraine. Though he ever criticized the Ukrainian refugees of being "social welfare tourism", he later apologized for

that.

Compared to the CDU, the AFD questioned the purpose of raising military spending, given that the AFD doesn't see Russia as a threat to Germany from the security perspective. The co-chairman of the AFD, Tino Chrupalla, in an interview with Sputnik, said that "Russia is not an enemy of Germany and other European countries; Russia is part of the European security interests".



Co-leader of the AFD Tino Chrupalla. (Alexander Zemlianichenko / AP / Sputnik).

Besides that, regarding Germany's relationship with the U.S. and other European countries, Tino Chrupalla indicated that "Germany should confidently deal with both the United States and the EU partners and protect Germany's interests... and more crucially, the German politicians are in need of starting to represent the real interests of the German citizens".

With regard to the Russia-Ukraine war, the AFD advocates achieving peace through negotiations, and opposes delivering weapons to Ukraine to prolong the conflict.

The Influence of the "Firewall" Principle in German Politics

The above has just listed a range of issues that the German political parties and the public have paid attention to. Here this piece only compared the positions and campaign promises

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made by two political parties, the CDU and the AFD. We can see that there are similarities and also big differences between them in terms of their positions on these issues.

For the time being, the CDU and the AFD roughly share a similar position on tightening relevant measures on immigration, taking steps to revive Germany's standing, as well as being committed to making Germany stronger and more independent in a longer term; while on issues related to military spending, Germany's relationship with both the EU and Russia, as well as the management of the Russia-Ukraine war etc., differences remain from various degrees between the AFD and the CDU.

In the campaign process, Merz had already claimed that his party will not seek a coalition with the AFD; while the co-leader of the AFD, Weidel, had expressed her party's open attitude toward aligning with other political parties - as she stated, "our hand will always be extended for a coalition government, to execute the will of the people, the will of Germany."

So, against this context, the CDU will have to either form a two-party coalition government with the SPD or cooperate with other smaller political parties to establish a multi-party ruling body, even under the circumstance that the SPD's approval rating has significantly declined. For the time being, the CDU has already taken steps to consult with the SPD for this purpose.

The question in the meantime raised is that how long the "firewall" principle in German politics could possibly be kept in place, against the evolving situation in a number of areas in Germany and beyond. Obviously, the upcoming government will face the similar political, economic, social, and security challenges, as encountered by the current government.

In order to get public support to the agenda set by the government, the upcoming coalition government will have to make some improvements in managing these areas of issues in the coming years, and failing to do so would likely create a bigger chance for the AFD to continue growing its influence.

Meanwhile, for the AFD, the party has demonstrated more flexibility toward aligning with other political parties. Nevertheless, what had happened in the 1930s and 1940s of the German history still appears to have a big impact on German politics and German political parties, obviously.

In recent years, there has been a rising trend of right-wing political parties not only in Germany, but also in many other countries across Europe and beyond including the UK, France, Austria, Italy and so on. Yet, compared to the domestic situation encountered by the AFD in German politics, the right-wing political parties in other countries generally face a different situation - there is no "firewall" principle applied for them, even though they may have faced other various challenges.

So, this unique condition set in German politics means that only by becoming the largest political force and gaining a significant majority of the public support, should there be a chance for the AFD to form a national governing body. It could also mean that, in contrast to other German political parties, the AFD may need to commit more effort to win the support of a certain group of German citizens, even though the AFD and other political parties may hold similar positions on some critical issues from occasion to occasion.

The February 2025 election results showed that most of the CDU's support came from those aged 45 and above; besides that, though the young Germans generally favoured the AFD more than the CDU, yet young males below the age of 25, compared to young females at the same age, appeared to be more inclined to vote for the AFD than for the CDU, as indicated by the fact that, 25% of young men under the age of 25 voted for the AFD in this election, while only 14% of young women at the same age did for the AFD.

The election results were quite complex. Generally, the older generations felt more closely linked to the CDU, while the younger generations favoured the AFD more. Therefore, for the AFD, gaining further ground among the older generations will need more effort, apparently.

It is not certain how long the German political parties would manage to keep the "firewall" principle in place. As already mentioned, the younger German generations generally are more inclined to choose the AFD. They represent the future of Germany and beyond. It would be important for the political parties to take this new situation and the concerns of the younger people into account in the longer term.

Factors Mattering to Syria's Future

Key points

- Syria's new government has sent out a series of inclusive and constructive signals for restoring or reshaping Syria's relationship with a wide variety of partners.
- The fall of the Assad regime wouldn't likely cause a big impact on Russia's presence in Syria in the near future.
- The Syrian new government needs to work out a more creative approach to engage with Israel.
- The fall of the Assad regime might open new possibilities for Iran-Syria relations.
- The former Syrian President Assad may still have some influence over Syria, yet the path for getting him back to the centre stage will be very hard (if not completely closed).
- The Syrian interim government is determined to build a different Syria in the future. So, for the interests of the Syrian new authority, it will need to be carefully handling the disputes raised among different religious groups within the society in the years ahead.



Syrians celebrate at the first Friday prayers since Bashar Assad's ouster at the central square in Damascus, Syria, on 13 December 2024. (File Photo / Hussein Malla / AP).

The quick fall of the Syrian Bashar Assad regime in December 2024 without much struggle of the anti-Assad government forces had surprised many from various fields. After the Assad regime being toppled, numerous Syrian people gathered on the street to celebrate the end of the Assad ruling and the beginning of a new era, yet Syria's future will still be full of challenges and uncertainties.

The Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), one of the few militant groups, had played a key role in leading to the fall of the Assad regime. Ahmad al-Sharaa, previously known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of the HTS, was appointed as head of state for a transitional period of the Syrian Arab Republic and “authorized to form a temporary legislative council for the transitional phase, which will carry out its duties until a permanent constitution is enacted and put into effect”, announced by Hassan Abdel Ghani, spokesman for the Syria Military Operations Command on 29 January 2025.



Ahmad al-Sharaa speaks at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on 8 December.
(Omar Albam / AP / CNN).

Syria has been facing a tough and complicated situation for years already, both internally and externally. The possible approach adopted by the Syrian new government in the years ahead in dealing with various internal and external issues will critically affect Syria's future domestic stability, the country's foreign relations with other key stakeholders, and the peace in the broad Middle East region.

This piece tends to explore and analyse some of the very important factors which would most likely cause a big impact on Syria's future.

The eruption of the Syrian civil war since 2011 has led to a great division of the Syrian society, a serious damage of the country's economy and people's well-being, and a deteriorating relationship between Syria and a number of countries. So, internally, the Syrian new government for a long time to come will focus on promoting domestic dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation among various groups, and striving to recover the country's economy; while externally, the new government will manage to restore or reshape the country's relationship with the important regional and international stakeholders in order to create a more friendly and enabling environment for helping Syria's recovery.

On the front of Syria's foreign relations, to fix the external challenges facing the country, it is still early to tell what approach and policies the Syrian new government might adopt and implement in the media- and long- term, and also whether or not the designed approach and relevant policies can be implemented.

Yet, for the time being, Syria's new leader al-sharaa on many diplomatic occasions has expressed the country's interest in constructively engaging with all relevant partners. The new government over the past few months has received foreign delegates from a number of countries including the United States, France, Germany, Russia, Turkey, and Syria's neighbours etc..

Syria's Diplomatic Engagements with Foreign Delegates from A Variety of Countries

During the Assad era, the diplomatic relationship between Syria and a number of countries had been stalled. Over the past years, Syria has been greatly suffering from the sanctions imposed by some Western countries. Following the fall of the Assad regime, some Western officials have expressed their interest in normalizing ties with Syria. Yet, in the meantime, they have also been very concerned about the future direction of Syria. In other words, the issue of whether or not the Syrian government would move toward a democratic governing system or abide by strict Islamic rules to govern the country would likely have an impact on how likely and when the sanctions imposed on Syria can be lifted, and how long it would possibly take for Western countries to normalize diplomatic relations with Syria.

Besides that, as for Syria's interactions with regional powers, since December, we have seen a sign that Syria would be willing to restore diplomatic ties and engage more closely with the country's neighbours in the Middle East region.

As led by the Syrian civil war, the relationship between Syria and some Middle East countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia etc. had undergone some changes. Obviously, the Syrian new government would be interested in making a new start for Syria's relations and cooperation with countries in the region.

Over the past few months, the Syrian government officials have met with the delegates from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Iraq, Morocco and so on. Meanwhile, the officials of the Syrian government have conducted a series of foreign visits including the Syrian new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa's visit to Saudi Arabia and Turkey in early February.

Generally, at the current stage, from Syria's perspective, constructively engaging with a variety of partners in the Middle East region and beyond would be conducive to the new government's effort in gathering more support and creating a more friendly environment for promoting the recovery of Syria.

Russia and Syria: A Possibility of Continuing the Longstanding Strategic Bilateral Ties

Specifically for Syria's foreign relations with Russia, during the Assad era, Russia had been a strong supporter to the Assad government in fighting against terrorism. Russia had played a key role in helping keep the survival of the Assad regime. Nevertheless, in response to the recent conflict from late November to early December 2024 between the Assad government forces and the anti-Assad regime forces, Russia had little involvement in it.

Some observers viewed that due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia had no extra hand to get involved in the Syrian issue.

It is assumed that the Russia-Ukraine conflict may have played a part in affecting Russia's decision of not getting involved in the recently occurred Syrian internal conflict. Besides that, even without being occupied by the Ukraine crisis, the Russian side might have realized that, given the evolving trend of Syria's domestic situation all over the past years, directly intervening in the fighting between the Assad regime and the anti-Assad militant groups could have further complicated the Syrian domestic situation, and that a possible scenario led by the growing complexity inside Syria would be counteractive to the interests of both Russia and Syria in the years ahead.

Even long before the fall of the Assad regime, the general picture of Syria's domestic situation had already shown that the Syrian broad public even including a large portion of Assad's supporters had been very tired of the long and lasting atrocities and devastation ruined by the war, as well as of the very serious corruption problem under the Assad regime.

Therefore, the fatigue demonstrated by the Syrian society and the Syrian military forces toward the war and other domestic problems under the Assad ruling could explain why within only twelve days, without great struggle taken place between the Assad government forces and the anti-Assad regime forces, the anti-government forces had quickly captured the Syrian capital.

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By the time when the Assad regime was approaching to an end, to protect the Russian military bases, servicemen, and Russian citizens in Syria, the Russian side had already started to stay in contact with the anti-Assad militant groups.

After the fall of the Assad regime, in an annual event in December 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin, when addressing a question related to Russia and Syria, said that “he would keep Russia’s presence there, only if Moscow’s interests coincided with those of the political forces that had taken control.”

The Syrian new government officials had also expressed an open attitude toward consulting with Russia on any possible arrangement. Syria’s new leader al-Sharaa, in an interview with Al Arabiya in late December, said that “Syria shares strategic interests with Russia”, and that “the new Syrian leadership does not wish for Russia’s presence in Syria to end ‘in a manner that is inconsistent’ with their longstanding bilateral relationship.”



Entrance of the Hmeimim Air Base outside Latakia, Syria, in late December 2024.

(Aaref Watad / Agence France-Presse / Getty Images / New York Times).

In the scholarly field, Nikolay Kozhanov, a consulting fellow with Chatham House viewed that “Syria’s opposition forces well understand that the country’s future is uncertain, they want Russia, if not as a friend, then a neutral party”; while “Moscow’s main goal will be to maintain at least a minimal level of influence through a military presence, for example, at its existing bases, or through contacts with other regional players, such as Turkey.”

Israel and Syria: The Syrian Government Needs to Work out A More Creative Approach to Manage the Country's Relations with Israel

For Syria's possible relations with Israel, apparently the Syrian new government will need to overcome some serious obstacles. Apart from the historical hostilities between the two countries, more recently, following the fall of the Assad regime, the Israel Defence Forces had immediately bombed hundreds of targets inside Syria and quickly occupied a certain part of the Syrian territory - the Mount Hermon summit. The Israeli side claimed that this is just a temporary occupation, with the purpose of preventing Israel from being attacked by another possible terrorist group or regime.

The Mount Hermon summit naturally sits at an important point for Israel and Syria; it is 2814 meters, the highest point inside Syria, and about 35 kilometers away from Syria's capital, Damascus. So, Israel's capture of this part of the Syrian territory has put Syria in a very vulnerable position from a strategic and geographic perspective.



Israeli soldiers stand on Mount Hermon, in Syria, after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the military to retake a demilitarized zone. (CNN).

Most likely Syria alone through bilateral negotiations with Israel can not manage this issue. It will need the involvement and mediation of other important parties.

Syria and Iran: A New Window for Reshaping the Syria-Iran Bilateral Ties or the Beginning of A Worsening Relationship?

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In relation to Syria's engagement with Iran, under the ruling of the Assad regime, Iran and Syria had kept a very close ties. The Syrian territory had occasionally been served as an important channel for Iran to deliver support to Iran's allies. So, as a result of the fall of the Assad regime, Iran appeared to have suffered a big loss.

Nevertheless, there is also a need to see that the fall of the Assad regime might have opened a new window for Iran and the Syrian new government to reshape the Syria-Iran relationship and jointly stabilize the situation in Syria and beyond.

The approach and actions possibly taken by Iran - whether Iran would choose to support any insurgent groups against the Syrian government or agree to jointly develop a constructive approach with Syria to manage the Syria-Iran bilateral ties - will be of very significance in affecting how the relationship between Iran and Syria will be like in the future.

In the Meantime, the possible approach adopted by the Syrian new government toward Iran will be of equally importance in affecting the direction of Syria's future relations with Iran and the possible security situation in Syria.

Syria's new leader al-Sharaa said that the Syrian transitional authority would aim to build an inclusive government. This means that the new government would accept and respect the reality of diversity among different groups and partners. In his meeting with a number of foreign delegates since December 2024, when addressing the issue related to religion and national conflict, al-Sharaa emphasised the significance of "reconciliation and co-existence", and viewed that "historical animosities shouldn't be taken as a factor in affecting today's relations" among various religions and nations.

Apparently, the Syrian new government had sent out a series of friendly and constructive signals, which would be conducive to the new government's effort in stabilizing the domestic situation as well as in rallying support from a variety of parties, internally and externally.

How Likely the Former Syrian President Assad Still Matters in Affecting Syria's Future?

Among various factors at the domestic level which might generate an impact on Syria, it is assumed that one of them could be related to the extended influence of the former Assad regime. The staunch supporters to the former Syrian leader may seek to regain certain influence. So, under that circumstance, Assad's departure would actually do no help for promoting reconciliation within the society.

By the time when the domestic situation was out of Assad's personal control, he had held

talks with the representatives of the anti-government forces, with whom, Assad agreed to peacefully transfer his power.

On 8 December, Russian Foreign Ministry stated that Assad had left Syria, and the decision of stepping down as president following his talks with opposition forces was Assad's own decision.

The Russian side also "reaffirmed its support for an 'inclusive political process' based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a peaceful resolution to the Syrian conflict through free elections and a new constitution."

Later on, the Russian government spokesperson Peskov confirmed that "the former Syrian leader had been granted asylum in Russia on humanitarian grounds and that the move was personally approved by Russian President Vladimir Putin."

Then, about a week following his arrival in Russia, Assad made his first public statement on Facebook that it wasn't in his plan to leave Syria. Amid Damascus being stormed by the opposition forces, he fled to the Russian military base in Latakia, where he planned to keep fighting with the insurgents. Nonetheless, after the Russian base was under drone attacks, Russian allies evacuated him to Russia.

Indeed, that situation was very critical and urgent for him.

It is assumed that, instead of leaving the country, another choice for Assad could be that, following his talks with opposition forces, he should have immediately, through the domestic and international media agencies, made a public announcement to the Syrian people and the world that he had reached a consensus with the opposition forces through negotiations, mainly indicating that he had agreed to give up his power, accommodate the needs of the Syrian domestic situation, and make a peaceful power transition.

Under that scenario, he would have been safe.

According to RT, for instance, after the opposition forces captured Damascus, then Prime Minister Mohammad al-Jalali had made a statement that he can be found at home in Damascus, and that he would cooperate with whoever chosen by the Syrian people.

Making a public announcement to call for an end to the fighting and atrocities by Assad following his negotiations with the anti-Assad militant groups would serve the interests of Assad himself and Syria. Then, in a long run, regarding whether or not Assad would be able to return to office, it will be decided by the Syrian people through holding free and transparent elections.

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It is not certain whether Assad would still aim to run office or return to Syria. If so, he may be able to generate some influence over Syria, yet the path for getting him back to the centre stage will be very hard (if not completely closed).

By the way, according to the media report, in early March 2025, a series of clashes occurred between the security forces of the Syrian new government and a group of militants in the Alawite-populated areas in Latakia and Tartus (the Alawites is a Muslim minority group, to which, the former Syrian President Assad is connected) led to the death of at least 1300 people, including more than 800 civilians. In response, a number of countries including the U.S. and Russia condemned the violence against civilians; Syria's new leader Ahmed al-sharaa also "condemned the violence and promised to hold those harming civilians accountable".



A scene of spent cartridges littering a street in the city of Latakia, Syria on 10 March 2025.
(Moawia Atrash / Getty Images / dpa / RT).

Civilians shouldn't be used or targeted by any armed forces or groups. Targeting minority civilian population would undermine the new Syrian government's endeavour in promoting domestic dialogue, inclusiveness, and reconciliation. The Syrian interim authority is determined to build a different Syria in the future. The current stage is just the very beginning toward achieving that goal. For the interests of the Syrian new authority, it will need to be carefully handling the disputes raised among different religious groups within the society in the years ahead.

Generally, it is assumed that the management of the above series of matters by the Syrian transitional government including Syria's domestic situation and possible engagements with a

variety of partners will greatly influence Syria's future. At the initial stage, the Syrian interim authority had shown a friendly and constructive attitude toward working with all relevant partners for restoring order in Syria and then for promoting the recovery of the country. No doubt, there will be full of uncertainties and challenges. From a medium- and long-term perspective, the government will need to ensure the successful implementation of relevant policies and measures, in line with the good signals delivered at the initial stage, in order to finally accomplish the goal of rebuilding Syria.

2. BUSINESS AND TRADE

The Trump Government’s Reciprocal Tariff Measure

Key Points

- The U.S. fast rising national debt and widening annual budget deficit over the past few years can tell that the tariffs-led inflation haven’t so far served the interests of the country and of the consumers well.
- The U.S. government tends to see the reciprocal tariff measure as a negotiation tactic in order to reshape the U.S. trade relations with other nations. In this case, regardless of whether or not the tariffs would serve the U.S. interests, the U.S. government senses the need to place the country in an leading position in trade negotiations with its trading partners.
- The U.S. government attempts to test whether or not the current government’s policies including the economic plan could work out after all. If not, it should still have time to do adjustment before the country’s mid-term election to take place in late 2026.

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U.S. President Donald Trump speaks in the Rose Garden, White House, on 2 April 2025, while showing a chart of raising 10% to 50% tariffs on imports to the U.S. from nearly all nations and regions from across the globe. (Carlos Barria / Reuters).

A new tariff measure on imposing additional 10% to 50% tariffs on foreign imports to the U.S.

came into effect on 3 April. This time, the tariff measure has targeted nearly all nations and regions from across the globe. No doubt, it will have a big impact on both the U.S. and other countries. This article tends to assess the purposes of raising tariffs by the U.S. toward other nations, and the feasibility of implementing this tariff measure, as well as the possible impacts of the U.S. tariff policy.

Getting American Companies back to the United States

As the U.S. government planned and expected, by raising tariffs on foreign imports, the U.S. companies would be motivated to move their production activities back to the United States; and their such doing would improve and strengthen the U.S. production chains and help create more jobs.

To support the implementation of the tariff measure and improve the attractiveness of the U.S. market to American companies, the U.S. government has already announced a series of measures including cutting corporate taxes and simplifying relevant regulations.

It is assumed that, apart from the supporting measures having already been adopted by the U.S. government, international companies may also tend to assess the possible impact of other important factors such as the availability and costs of labour forces back in the U.S., the market size, and the prospect of policy changes in both U.S. and other markets etc., before making a decision regarding whether or not and to what level they would plan to relocate their business operations.

From both a short- and long-term perspective, companies cannot ignore the prospect of production costs, the feasibility of profits, and the balance of supply and demand related to their products.

For transnational companies, they tend to acquire the share of foreign markets as bigger as possible. So, some companies may worry that whether relocating their production capacities back to the U.S. would risk losing a significant share of other important markets, as a result of the responsive tariff measures possibly adopted by other nations toward the United States.

So, under the current situation, most companies may tend to wait and see what are going to happen next at the policy level before rushing to make any important decisions; while some, at the very initial stage, may just think about relocating part of their business capacities to the U.S..

Using the Tariff Measure as A Negotiation Tactic

Raising tariff rate on foreign imports could be one of the negotiation tactics of the U.S. government, serving a purpose of pushing other countries to lower tariffs on U.S.-made products, as the U.S. president claimed, the tariff measure targeted at other nations was a reciprocal response to the higher tariffs having long been implemented by other countries toward the United States over the past years.

So, under this circumstance, it is assumed that, as far as other countries agree to lower their tariffs to the same level, as previously adopted by the U.S., most likely, the U.S. government would lift the newly implemented tariff measure toward these nations.

The current situation is that it is not certain how likely and to what degree the nations being affected by the U.S. tariff measure would agree to accommodate the U.S. demands, given that these countries and regions are at different development stages and most of them are obviously far less developed than the United States.

The U.S. key trading partners including Canada, the EU, and China etc. have expressed opposition to the U.S. tariff policy, as well as their readiness to take countermeasures toward the U.S. imports to these countries.

On 4 April, one day following the U.S. newly adopted tariff measure coming into effect, China announced a countermeasure on raising 34% duties on all U.S. imports to China, and meanwhile urged the U.S. to lift its newly implemented tariffs on Chinese imports to the U.S..

Shifting American Consumers' Purchasing Habit and Bolstering Economic Figures

Further more, the U.S. government expected that the rising prices of imported commodities led by the tariff measure somehow may help shift American consumers' purchasing habit and encourage them to buy more locally made products; and the increasing consumption of the U.S.-made products would further help strengthen the U.S. production chains.

Raising tariffs on foreign imports would lead to inflation, yet inflation may not necessarily be a negative forecast under all conditions. Inflation could lead to two possible scenarios - economic growth or recession. There could be a case that inflation would drive the increase of consumption and further improve the overall economic performance (though not in real terms). Another scenario could be that, as led by inflation, consumers cannot afford the same quality products and services anymore, so that the general consumption capacity would shrink, some companies may be forced to lay off a certain number of workers, unemployment rate would rise in this case, and the overall economic situation would deteriorate after all.

The U.S. currently has a national debt of around \$36 trillion and an annual budget deficit of \$1.8 trillion. According to the rating agency Moody', the country's fiscal health would risk further declining due to its large national debt and rising budget deficit. Likewise, founder of Bridgewater Associates, Ray Dalio, in an interview with Bloomberg in early March, also warned that, the U.S. government needs to cut federal budget deficit, otherwise, the country would face a debt crisis within three years.

In line with the Trump government's economic plan, the U.S. would cut \$4.5 trillion in taxes and \$2 trillion in spending, in addition to increase spending on national security and border control.

Obviously, cutting taxes and increasing spending on defence and the handling of illegal immigration would conflict with each other, when it relates to the government's attempt in improving the budget condition.

Therefore, under the current situation, improving American consumers' purchasing power should be the key in helping address the conflicting interests in the economic area, facing the U.S. government, given that the U.S. is a consumption-driven economy, and that within a short period, it would be hard to think that there could be any dramatic changes to take place in terms of elevating the U.S. general production capacity.

Regarding the matter of whether rising inflation caused by tariffs would lead to a recession or an improvement of the economic condition, there is no unified views among the observers from a variety of fields.

Some experts, such as Matias Vernengo, professor of economics at Bucknell University, maintained that the U.S. wouldn't likely face a recession; and according to him, further lowering interest rates by the U.S. government would help prevent a recession, as this action could bolster consumption.

While some observers, like Jacob Channel, former senior economist at Lending Tree, predicted that very likely the U.S. economy would suffer a recession, as he pointed, "a combination of tariffs, mass deportations, and tax breaks are likely to result in an economy where prices are rising, businesses are struggling to keep afloat, and where the government is less equipped to intervene and provide stability".

Generally, there is a debate at the moment regarding the forecast of the U.S. economy in the months ahead, against the backdrop of implementing the Trump government's economic plan.

Fulfilling the U.S. President's Campaign Promise & Seeking Domination toward Reshaping the U.S. Trade Relations with the Country's Trading Partners

As already mentioned, within a short term and even in a long term, it is not certain whether raising tariffs can be an effective means to encourage American companies to move back to the United States. The U.S. government may have been well aware of this.

There is also no adequate and convincing reason to believe that increasing tariffs would definitely help address the U.S. debt and fiscal problems and improve the economic performance in substantial/real terms.

For instance, during the former U.S. President Biden's term, the rising inflation (this very much had a relevance to the wars happening in Europe and the Middle East as well as the tariffs raised by the U.S. toward China) resulted in positive economic growth, up from \$26.47 trillion in 2021 to \$28.83 trillion in 2024. Nevertheless, throughout the same period, the U.S. national debt condition had got worse from \$28.43 trillion in 2021 to the current level of \$36.21 trillion. Apparently, the U.S. GDP had grown much slower, compared to the country's debt increase in the same period. Besides that, the U.S. annual budget deficit had surged from \$1.38 trillion in 2022 to \$1.83 trillion in 2024.

So, the tariff measures and rising inflation, over the past years, haven't really served the real interests of American consumers. They also haven't helped to improve the U.S. debt and fiscal conditions.

Nevertheless, even under these circumstances, partly in order to fulfill one of the campaign promises made by U.S. President Trump concerning the matter of tariffs - regardless of whether it was wrong or right, or of whether it was supposed to be a long term measure or a temporary one - the U.S. government obviously sensed the need to keep the words ever made the U.S. president during the 2024 campaign process.

Furthermore, most crucially, as already mentioned, the Trump government may still tend to see the tariff measures as a bargaining tactic in negotiations with the U.S. trading partners, in order to reshape the U.S. trade relations with other nations. In other words, regardless of whether or not and to what degree, the tariffs would serve the U.S. interests, the U.S. tends to place itself in an leading position in trade negotiations with the country's trading partners.

According to the media report, Israeli Prime Minister made a trip to the U.S.. So, Israel would likely become the first nation to talk about the tariff issue with the U.S., in response to the reciprocal tariff measure adopted by the U.S..

From the Trump government's perspective, it is assumed that 2025 should be the appropriate

time for the U.S. to test whether or not the relevant policies including the economic plan could work out. If not, the U.S. government should still have time to do adjustment before the country's mid-term election to take place in late 2026.

3. OPINION

The War Situation in Russia's Kursk Region

Highlights

The Russian military, by early April, had reached Ukraine's Sumy region. The situation in the Kursk region is under Russia's control, and the region has lost its value as a bargaining stake for the Ukrainian side in negotiations with Russia. It is important for Ukraine to reassess whether there is still a point for the Ukrainian servicemen to continue their struggles in the Kursk region.



In this photo, taken from video, released by the Russian Defence Ministry on Wednesday, 2 April 2025, a "Grad" self-propelled 122-mm multiple rocket launcher fires toward Ukrainian position in the Russian-Ukrainian border area in the Kursk region, Russia. (Russian Defense Ministry Press Service photo via AP). **Cited from CTVNEWS.**

The Ukrainian troops in the Kursk region have been facing a very tough condition in recent months, alongside the Russian military carrying out a counteroffensive operation in the region.

Since the Ukrainian military made a surprise incursion into Russia's Kursk region in early August 2024, the country has suffered great casualties. Till mid-March, Ukraine had lost more than 67000 servicemen on the battlefield in Kursk.

In recent weeks, the Russian military has been making further advancement in the Kursk region. In mid-March, it had already put the Ukrainian troops being left in the region in isolation and encirclement. By late March, the Russian forces had cleaned up the Sudzha border checkpoint with Ukraine, and pushed the Ukrainian forces further down to the border between Russia and Ukraine. By early April, as reported by the media, the Russian army had reached Ukraine's Sumy region.



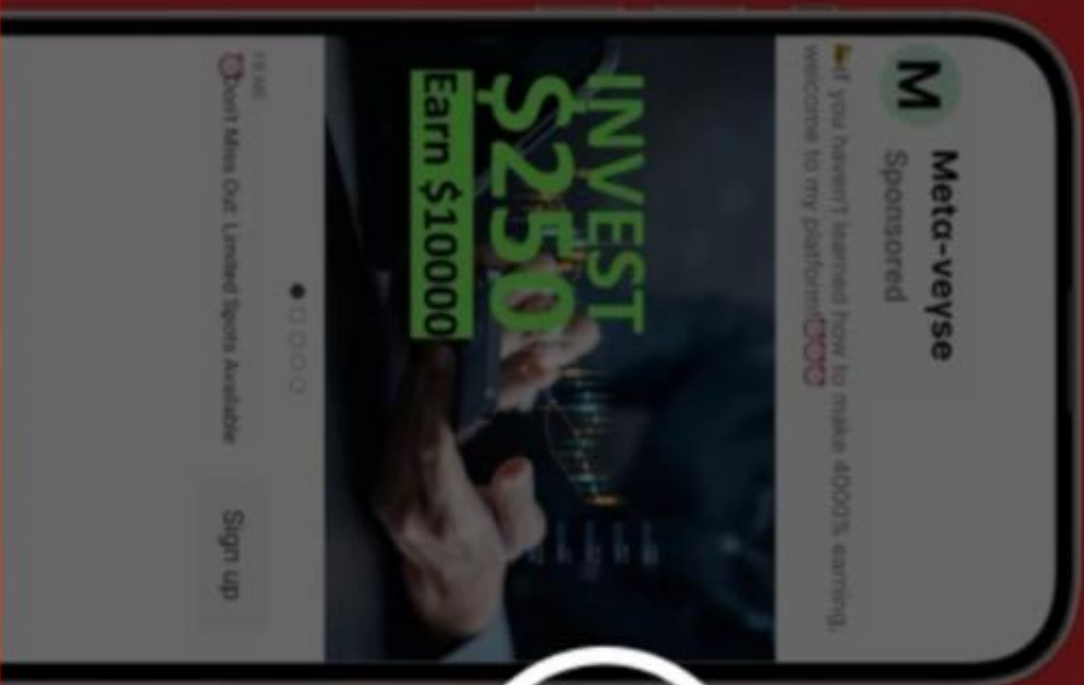
The border regions of Russia and Ukraine on the Map. Cited from INSIGHTSIAS.

Meanwhile, according to Reuters's report, by early April, the Ukrainian army still controlled about 58 square kilometers of the Kursk territory, compared to maximally 1400 square kilometers occupied by Ukraine, previously.

The U.S. President Trump in March ever urged the Russian forces to spare the Ukrainian servicemen being left in the Kursk region. The Russian President Putin in response claimed that those who choose to lay down their arms would be treated with dignity in line with international law and Russian legal norms.

Initially, the Ukrainian side was motivated to take the occupation of the Kursk region as a bargaining chip in any possible negotiations with Russia. Yet, for the time being, given that the situation there is completely under the control of Russian forces, the region apparently has lost its value as a bargaining stake for the Ukrainian side. So, for avoiding more casualties, it is important for the Ukrainian side to understand clearly of the current situation and reassess whether there is still a point for the Ukrainian servicemen to continue their struggles in Russia's Kursk region.

4. BRAND INFLUENCE



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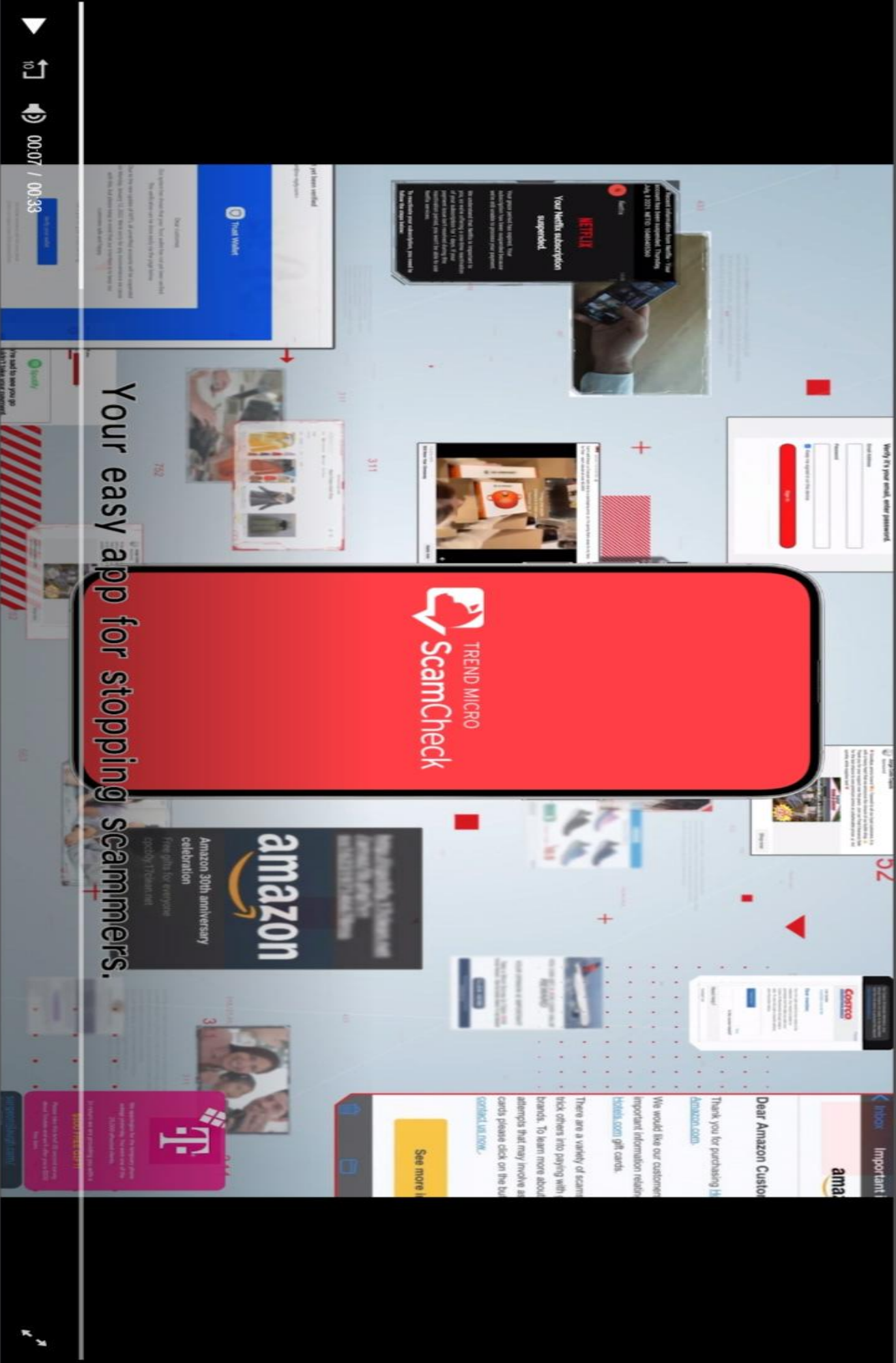
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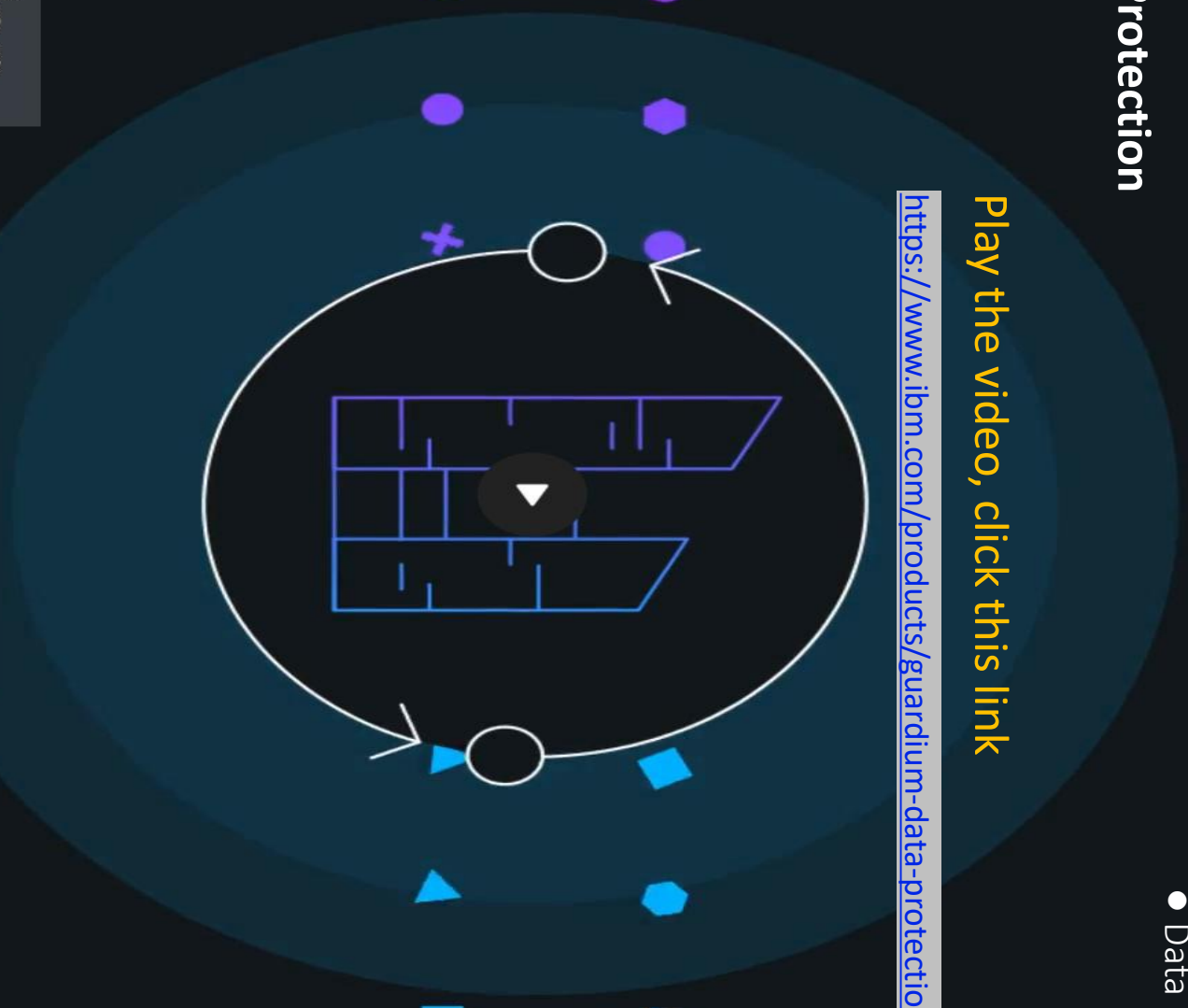
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