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Gaza Peace Process: Board of Peace and Implementation Challenges

On 22 January 2026, United States (US) President Donald Trump inaugurated the "Board of Peace" at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, unveiling an international mechanism to sustain the Israel-Hamas ceasefire and shape Gaza's political and economic future. The Board's members include Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, UAE, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Mongolia, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Hungary, Kosovo, Argentina, El Salvador, Paraguay, and the US. Major European powers, including Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, and Sweden, refused to join, citing concerns about undermining the UN's institutional role, constitutional barriers, Russia's invitation, and tensions over Greenland and tariffs. Spain flagged the absence of the Palestinian Authority from the Board's structure, while New Zealand declined membership, emphasising support for the UN Charter.

The Board's charter designates Trump as chairman for life with exclusive authority to establish, modify, or dissolve subsidiary bodies. A US$1 billion contribution secures permanent membership instead of three-year appointments, prompting critics to describe it as a "pay-to-play club." The initiative features three tiers: the Board of Peace as the supreme council; the Gaza Executive Board led by Nikolay Mladenov, with members including Jared Kushner, Steve Witkoff, Tony Blair, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, Qatari Minister Ali al-Thwadi, and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, to oversee reconstruction, security, and disarmament; and the 15-member National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) led by Dr. Ali Shaath to manage civilian services. The executive Board includes no Palestinian representatives but gives Israel a seat. Major General Jasper Jeffers was appointed Commander of the International Stabilisation Force, though deployment remains pending.

Kushner outlined a vision for Gaza's redevelopment, proposing the construction of a seaport, an airport, and new cities, requiring at least $25 billion. The phased rebuilding would begin in Rafah and move northward. The plan links reconstruction to demilitarisation: immediate decommissioning of heavy weapons and sector-by-sector collection of small arms by Palestinian police. Hamas seeks to incorporate its 10,000 police officers into the new administration, likely opposed by Israel. Despite Netanyahu's formal acceptance, Israel objects to Türkiye and Qatar's roles due to Hamas ties, insisting on complete disarmament first. Far-right ministers Ben-Gvir and Smotrich dismissed US mediators as "naive," demanding direct Israeli military rule and seeking renewed Jewish settlement.

On 26 January 2026, Israel recovered the body of Ran Gvili, the last Israeli hostage, clearing a significant condition for Phase Two advancement. Following his 28 January burial, Israel confirmed Rafah corridor preparations. On 1 February, the Rafah crossing partially reopened in a "pilot phase" for pedestrians only, coordinated with Egypt and the EU. The crossing, Gaza's only non-Israeli border point, had been closed since May 2024. About 20,000 Palestinians await medical

evacuation while 80,000 seek return. However, the entry for humanitarian aid remains unclear. The ceasefire agreement mandated 600 trucks per day, but Israel allowed only 260 (43 per cent) from 10 October 2025 to 31 January 2026.

On 31 January 2026, Israeli strikes killed around 32 Palestinians, including several children, hitting locations in Gaza City and Khan Younis. According to Gaza's Government Media Office, Israel violated the ceasefire 1,450 times from 10 October to 31 January through strikes, artillery, and shootings, including 487 civilian shootings, 71 residential raids, 679 bombings, and 211 property demolitions. Gaza's Health Ministry recorded 509 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire since the ceasefire, with 1,405 injured. On 29 January, the IDF confirmed approximately 70,000 Palestinians died in the war while disputing UN civilian casualty percentages and denying starvation deaths. As of 1 February, Gaza's Ministry reported 71,769 Palestinians killed and 171,264 injured since 7 October 2023.

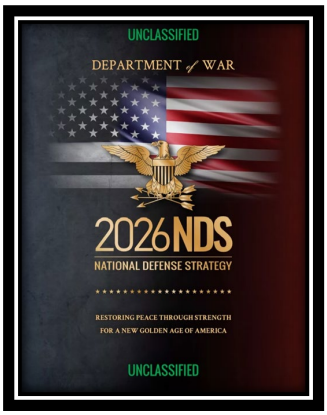
Hamas called the strikes "flagrant violations," with senior official Bassem Naim questioning whether this represents a "Board of War" rather than peace. Foreign ministers of eight Arab-Islamic countries, including Pakistan, strongly condemned Israel's violations. The Board faces substantial criticism: former chair of The Elders, Mary Robinson, described it as a "delusion of power," noting that its charter omits Gaza despite being based on UN Resolution 2803. Critics argue it centralises power, excludes Palestinians from decision-making, and undermines multilateral legitimacy. Israel's continued attacks threaten NCAG operations, requiring sustained political pressure for mandate fulfilment. On 1 February, Israel terminated Doctors Without Borders operations, further constraining relief efforts. The Rafah reopening marks a tentative advance, but the peace plan's viability remains uncertain amid ongoing violations and structural tensions.

The 2026 US National Defence Strategy: Redefining Indo-Pacific Commitments

The Trump administration's 2026 National Defence Strategy marks the most significant reorientation of American military priorities since the post-Cold War era, establishing an explicit hierarchy that prioritises homeland defence first, China deterrence second, and relegating all other theatres to allied leadership with "critical but limited" American support. The document fundamentally breaks with decades of forward defence posture, introducing what it terms the "Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine" while demanding unprecedented burden-sharing from allies worldwide.

The strategy rests on four lines of effort: defending the homeland, deterring China through strength without confrontation, increasing allied burden-sharing, and supercharging the defence industrial base. On homeland defence, the document prioritises sealing borders, countering narco-terrorists throughout the hemisphere, securing key terrain, including Greenland and the Panama Canal, developing the "Golden Dome for America" missile defence system, modernising nuclear forces, bolstering cyber defences, and maintaining resource-sustainable counterterrorism focused on organisations capable of striking the homeland. The strategy asserts American military dominance throughout the Western Hemisphere, backed by

references to operations like "ABSOLUTE RESOLVE" against narco-terrorist organisations.



In defence industrial base revitalisation, the strategy calls for national mobilisation comparable to those of World War II and the Cold War. It emphasises expanding production capacity, empowering innovators, adopting artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, clearing regulatory obstacles, and leveraging allied production to help partners field forces rapidly while meeting American requirements.

For the Indo-Pacific, the strategy articulates a fundamentally defensive posture centred on building a "strong denial defence along the First Island Chain"—a defensive perimeter from Japan through Taiwan to the Philippines. Rather than maintaining comprehensive regional superiority, it seeks to prevent Chinese domination while explicitly eschewing attempts to dominate, humiliate, or strangle China. The document calls for wider military-to-military communications with the PLA focused on strategic stability, deconfliction, and de-escalation, while simultaneously maintaining deterrence by denial. The goal is achieving a "decent peace" in which trade flows openly and fairly, with China able to accept terms that respect American and allied interests without requiring regime change or an existential struggle.

The strategy's most radical departure involves burden-sharing with allies. Trump has established a new global standard for defence spending—5% of GDP, comprising 3.5% on core military capabilities and 1.5% on security-related expenditure. The suggested benchmark applies universally to all US allies and partners, not just to NATO. As per NDS, European allies must assume "primary responsibility for Europe's conventional defence," given that non-U.S. NATO economies dwarf Russia's $2 trillion economy, totalling $26 trillion. The document explicitly states Europe should take the lead in supporting Ukraine's defence. In the Middle East, regional partners, including Israel and the Arabian Gulf states, should take primary responsibility for deterring Iran and its proxies. South Korea, with its powerful military and robust defence industry, should assume primary responsibility for deterring North Korea. The strategy emphasises incentivising model allies who visibly do more against regional threats while reducing cooperation with those who fail to meet spending commitments.

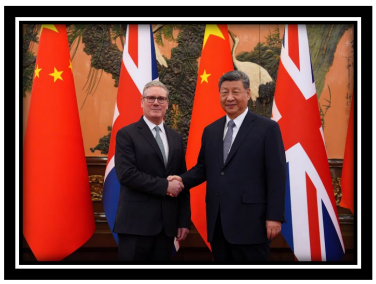
Comparing this to previous strategies reveals stark contrasts. The 2022 Biden NDS emphasised integrated deterrence across multiple theatres simultaneously, treating threats in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East as roughly equivalent priorities that require a sustained American presence. It stressed multilateral cooperation within existing alliance frameworks and avoided explicit demands for burden sharing. Trump's first-term 2018 NDS identified great power competition as the primary concern but maintained traditional global engagement patterns without fundamentally restructuring alliance relationships or explicitly deprioritising any theatres. The 2026 strategy openly declares simultaneity problems—potential concurrent conflicts across regions—and resolves them through allied self-reliance rather than expanded American commitments.

The Quad receives no explicit mention despite its prominence in the Biden-era Indo-Pacific strategy, suggesting a potential downgrading of minilateral architectures in favour of bilateral relationships. The strategy's insistence that allies focus resources on immediate regions—explicitly telling Europeans their "efforts and resources are best focused on Europe"—indicates reduced appetite for coordinating complex multi-regional coalitions. Regional partners must increasingly manage security challenges within American-defined defensive perimeters.

India receives no mention in the document—a notable omission given its absence from discussions of Indo-Pacific partnerships, Quad framework, defence industrial collaboration, or burden-sharing expectations. The strategy's universal burden-sharing standard of 5% of GDP in Defence spending would apply to India as to all partners, though India currently spends approximately 2% of GDP on defence. The document's silence on South Asian security dynamics, Pakistan, or counterterrorism cooperation marks a departure from previous frameworks that positioned India as a major defence partner central to Indo-Pacific strategy.

Starmer's China Reset: Key Takeaways from the UK PM's Beijing Visit

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's January 2025 visit to Beijing marked the first trip by a UK leader to China in nearly 7 years, signalling a pragmatic recalibration of Western engagement with the world's second-largest economy. The visit, coming amid continuing geopolitical tensions and ideological divergence, represents less a fundamental shift in Britain's strategic orientation than a cold-eyed recognition of economic realities and the limits of confrontational posturing.



UK-China relations had worsened considerably since Theresa May's 2018 visit, hitting remarkably low points during the Johnson and Truss governments. London's involvement in the AUKUS security alliance, its more rigid stance on Hong Kong after the 2020 National Security Law, restrictions on Huawei's participation in British 5G networks, and increasingly fierce criticism of China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang had all contributed to what Beijing called a "Cold War mentality." The bilateral relationship had essentially been put on ice, marked by mutual recrimination. Starmer's Labour government, elected in July 2024, inherited not just fragile diplomatic ties but also an economy hampered by sluggish growth, persistent inflation, and the lingering effects of Brexit. The new government faced a key question: whether Britain can afford to maintain a significant distance from a Chinese economy that accounts for roughly 18 per cent of global GDP while still trying to boost its own economic prospects.

The visit produced tangible economic results, emphasising its transactional nature. Both governments announced agreements worth about £600 million across sectors such as financial services, clean energy technology, and healthcare. British financial institutions gained increased market access, while discussions on climate cooperation and renewable energy partnerships provided politically acceptable frameworks for strengthening commercial ties. Significantly, Starmer secured commitments for regular economic and financial dialogues—mechanisms that had

been suspended during the relationship's lowest point. These channels are less about immediate deals and more about creating predictable frameworks that reduce risk for British firms considering investments in China or for Chinese companies exploring UK operations.

Nevertheless, the visit's carefully planned approach also highlighted its limitations. Starmer publicly expressed concerns about human rights, Hong Kong's political situation, and China's relationship with Russia—meeting domestic political expectations without suggesting that Britain would compromise its core values for commercial interests. For its part, Beijing gained increased legitimacy by hosting a leading Western figure while offering few meaningful concessions on contentious issues.

Britain's engagement is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader Western recalibration. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Beijing in 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron maintains regular high-level contacts, and even the United States, despite continuing strategic competition, has sought to establish "guardrails" preventing rivalry from escalating into confrontation. Several factors drive this pivot. First, the decoupling rhetoric prominent during 2020-2022 proved economically unrealistic. China remains deeply embedded in global supply chains, particularly in critical sectors like pharmaceuticals, rare earth elements, and renewable energy technology. Complete economic separation would impose massive costs on Western economies already struggling with inflation and sluggish growth. Second, the Ukraine war has absorbed considerable Western attention and resources, making simultaneous maximum pressure campaigns on multiple fronts unsustainable. European nations in particular have discovered that managing one major geopolitical challenge while maintaining economic stability requires selective engagement elsewhere. Third, the climate agenda provides political cover for renewed engagement. Cooperation on emissions reduction, renewable energy deployment, and green technology development offers Western leaders domestically palatable justifications for Beijing dialogues that might otherwise face criticism as appeasement. Finally, there is growing recognition that isolating China has not moderated its behaviour on issues such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, or domestic governance. If confrontation fails to achieve stated objectives while imposing economic costs, pragmatic engagement—combining selective cooperation with continued pressure on core concerns—becomes the logical alternative.

Starmer's visit encapsulates an emerging Western approach: strategic ambiguity replacing strategic clarity. Rather than definitively characterising China as either a partner or an adversary, Britain and other Western nations are attempting to maintain simultaneous engagement and hedging—pursuing economic opportunities while strengthening security partnerships like AUKUS, while also maintaining technological restrictions. This approach's sustainability remains uncertain. Beijing may demand more substantive political concessions in exchange for deeper economic access, while domestic constituencies in Western democracies may resist what they perceive as a moral compromise. The visit ultimately represents not resolution but recalibration—an acknowledgement that neither confrontation nor accommodation alone serves Western interests, leaving the difficult work of navigating between them as the enduring challenge.