

# THE EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY ORDER AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE<sup>1</sup>

Patricia Daehnhardt

## INTRODUCTION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sealed the collapse of the European security order created after 1991, the end of peace and the return of war in Europe. With its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, Russia aims to annex a sovereign neighboring state, overruling Ukraine's 31-year-old political sovereign statehood, and deny it the right to existence. This unprecedented violation of international law was sparked by President Putin's revisionist imperialist ambition to recover its sphere of influence and reconstitute great imperial Russia. But this war is not only a war against Ukraine. It is also an attack against Europe's democracies, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the wider euro-Atlantic security community, based on Putin's resentment against the democratic and liberal West and the Atlantic Alliance. As a response to Russia's invasion the Biden administration and its European allies have shown impressive unity in their determination to provide military, financial and humanitarian means to help Ukraine defend itself.

It is of course difficult to make predictions as to the ongoing war and its outcome for the Euro-Atlantic security order. The article makes five observations which stand out in the responses to the war and how they may affect the European security order. The first section deals with the collapse of the European security order and the return of large-scale inter-state war. The second section discusses how NATO has responded and how the transatlantic

## ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sealed the collapse of the European security order created after 1991, the end of peace and the return of war in Europe. In its place a confrontational international disorder is emerging characterized by the weakening of the rules based international order, and by the ideological crystallization between democracies and autocracies. The article assesses how both the US and the EU have responded to the war in Ukraine, all while forging a new transatlantic security architecture. While this war has already shattered the European post-cold war order, it may become the prelude to the first war of the ongoing power transition between the United States and China.

*Keywords:* Ukraine war, NATO, transatlantic security community, power transition.

## RESUMO

### A ORDEM DE SEGURANÇA EURO-ATLÂNTICA E A GUERRA NA UCRÂNIA

A invasão russa da Ucrânia selou o colapso da ordem de segurança europeia criada após 1991, o fim da paz e o regresso da guerra na Europa.



No seu lugar, está a surgir uma desordem internacional de confronto caracterizada pelo enfraquecimento das regras que sustentam a ordem internacional e pela cristalização ideológica entre democracias e autocracias. O artigo avalia como os Estados Unidos e a União Europeia responderam à guerra na Ucrânia, ao mesmo tempo que forjam uma nova arquitetura de segurança transatlântica. Embora esta guerra já tenha abalado a ordem europeia do pós-Guerra Fria, pode tornar-se o prelúdio da primeira guerra da transição de poder em curso entre os Estados Unidos e a China.

*Palavras-chave:* guerra na Ucrânia, NATO, comunidade de segurança transatlântica, transição de poder.

security community has been revitalized. The third section assesses the United States (US)-Europe relationship and the US's renewed commitment to Europe, despite China remaining the US's strategic priority. The fourth point addresses the European Union's response to the war in Ukraine. Finally, the article returns to the question of the European security order by looking at how China has thus far positioned itself vis-à-vis the war between Russia and Ukraine, and how the US-China competition for global hegemony is likely to have implications for the European security order and transatlantic security community. While this war has already shattered the European post-cold war order, it may become the prelude to the first war of the ongoing power transition between the US and China.

## **THE COLLAPSE OF THE EUROPEAN SECURITY ORDER AND THE RETURN OF WAR**

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine marked the collapse of the European security order and the end of 77 years of long peace in Europe.<sup>2</sup> The demise of the post-Cold War international order was a long time in coming and the Euro-Atlantic stability had fallen prey to different crises with Moscow. The frozen conflict in Moldova's region of Transnistria, since the 1990s, the five-day war in Georgia, in 2008, Russia's induced Ukraine's energy crises in 2004 and 2009, Russian cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and election interference in European Union (EU) countries, were successive stumbling blocks of a cooperative European security structure in which three decades of post-Cold war peace and security became ever more fragile. It resulted from President Vladimir Putin's revisionist policy of destabilizing Russia's near abroad, especially in those post-Soviet countries that had entered an institutionalized relationship with the EU through the Eastern Partnership in 2009. Outside the Euro-Atlantic area, Russia supported Syria's leader Bashar al-Assad in the ongoing civil war since 2011. But Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, in 2014, put the stability in the Euro-Atlantic area under even more strain. Russia's unlawful annexation was a watershed moment. Already then, 'the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine represented a radical change in the European status quo, and Putin's strategic offensive decisively altered the European security framework as it had existed since the end of the Cold War'.<sup>3</sup> A change of frontiers through force violated international agreements such as the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, the 1990 Charter of Paris, both of which recognized the territorial status quo in Europe, and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty, was unprecedented in the Euro-Atlantic area. The Russian President was following the script that he had announced to a disbelieved

audience at the Munich Security Conference, in 2007, when he expanded on his revisionist vision and stated his aim to unravel the post-1991 order, including the rejection of post-Soviet states' sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> In the summer of 2021, the President published an article in which he denied Ukraine's right to existence due to the supposed historical unity between Russians and Ukrainians.<sup>5</sup>

Raising the stakes on the deteriorating NATO-US-Russia relationship, on 17 December 2021 Putin presented NATO and the US with two draft treaties demanding legally binding security guarantees for Russia: NATO should commit to no further enlargements, a legally binding written guarantee that Ukraine would never join NATO and withdraw all military infrastructure and Allied forces from NATO countries that had joined the Alliance after 1997.<sup>6</sup>

Russia's security demands were unacceptable both to the US and to the Europeans as they would have amounted to legitimizing the end of the post-Cold War security order that had been negotiated in 1997 between the West and Russia in the NATO-Russia Founding Act and represented a reversal of NATO's eastward enlargement. In other words, both ultimatums demanded that NATO return to its Cold War order disposition, annul the Alliance's 'open

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door policy' which had paved the way for the integration of fourteen Central and Eastern European countries which had voluntarily joined the Alliance after 1991, and return to a division of the European security order into great power zones of influence.

As Putin's stated argument for his actions – Ukraine's NATO membership – was not on the negotiating table between Kyiv and NATO, it was clear that this was merely a manipulative move with the aim to attack Ukraine, regardless of the West's answer. The Russian President had always opposed NATO enlargements. As Robert Kagan observed, in 2018, 'more than Russia's security, NATO enlargement threatened Russia's ability to reassert its regional sphere of influence, to reclaim its position as a dominant power in Eastern and Central Europe and its standing on the world stage as an equal of the United States'.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the ultimatums were the culmination of the revisionist claims that Putin had advanced forward for almost two decades to establish a Russian zone of influence over Ukraine and the post-Soviet space and to open a wedge between the US and its European allies and help Russia advance its goal of expanding its hegemony over Europe.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, during 2021 the President ordered the positioning of around 100,000 Russian troops at the Belarus-Ukraine border in preparation for the full-scale invasion of the country on 24 February 2022.<sup>9</sup> To ensure China's acquiescence, on 4 February Putin signed a Russian-Chinese treaty with President Xi Jinping, in Beijing, which declared their 'unlimited friendship'. Putin and Xi converge in their opposition

to the Western democracies and more importantly, to America's global predominance.<sup>10</sup> By invading Ukraine and starting a full-scale war the Kremlin, however, made a series of strategic miscalculations, which prevented it from achieving its goal of a rapid subjugation of Ukrainian forces and installation of a puppet government in Kyiv through what it called a 'special military operation'.<sup>11</sup> The Russian president underestimated the Ukrainian leadership and people. First, the government in Kyiv was not overturned and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky did not abandon his country but asserted himself as a wartime leader of Churchillian magnitude. Second, the resilience of the Ukrainian people and its ability to resist the enemy and defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of their country is impressive. In the process, Ukrainians are consolidating the unity of their country and strengthening their national identity which had been under strain in the preceding years, particularly in the war-torn areas in the Donbas in Eastern Ukraine. Finally, Russia's war has clarified Ukraine's geopolitical position in the Euro-Atlantic security order: if before the war Ukraine was seen as a buffer state between the EU and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, the outbreak of war has shifted the West's Eastern border to the east and Ukraine is now, albeit without immediate EU and NATO membership, a front state in the West's border with Russia. This, in turn, is enlarging the transatlantic security community. Furthermore, President Putin misjudged and underestimated the West's response. NATO, the EU, the US, and like-minded states responded in an unprecedented and unified manner. NATO has strengthened collective defense and deterrence on its Eastern flank, Finland and Sweden will likely become NATO members in 2023, the EU has adopted a series of sanctions packages against Russia, individual states have committed to greater defense spending, and NATO, the EU, and a coalition of over 40 countries is committed to help Ukraine defend its country.

President Putin's energy cut-offs and threats of using nuclear weapons have not intimidated Europeans but rather strengthened them in their resolve to assist Ukraine and reduce their own energy dependence from Russia. Despite soaring energy prices and rising inflation, public opinion in Europe and the US have supported the provision of humanitarian, financial and military assistance to Ukraine. Throughout 2022, European public opinions were supportive of their governments' decisions regarding humanitarian aid, taking in Ukrainian refugees, adopting economic sanctions, and supplying heavy military equipment to Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> Regarding transatlantic relations, European and Americans favor the maintenance of US involvement in European security and defense.<sup>13</sup> In the first months of the war the West was hopeful that negotiations could be achieved once Russian offensive power had been weakened on the battle ground, as happened in the summer of 2022. But losing on the battlefield only made Putin more determined to continue the brutality of war to prevent Russia's strategic defeat and Putin's own demise. In September 2022, Putin turned military weakness into a political offensive by unilaterally declaring the annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts partially occupied by

Russian troops, namely Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia, and declaring a partial mobilization in Russia.<sup>14</sup>

The war meant to serve the Kremlin's triple purpose of denying Ukraine's sovereign right to existence, weakening the EU and NATO and driving a wedge between Europeans and Americans. Dividing the transatlantic allies is a goal that both Russia and China, the other revisionist autocratic regime, share, together with ending the US global predominance: Russia's strategic goal is to drive a wedge between the US and Europe to weaken the European security order and allow for Russia to substitute it for its own vision; China's strategic goal is to drive a wedge between the US and Europe to prevent a joint Euro-Atlantic front against China in Asia.

But Putin misjudged the reconstitution of the transatlantic security community and President Biden's commitment to defend the liberal order, together with its European allies and other democratic like-minded countries as part of his administration's strategy. The Euro-Atlantic security community is set to enlarge, with NATO expanding to include Finland and Sweden and the European Union eventually enlarging to include Ukraine and Moldova.

Finally, Russia's own security was not enhanced and the losses it has so far incurred in number of Russian soldiers' lives, equipment and political support is a cost that seems to outweigh the gains Putin expects to make out of the war.<sup>15</sup> To the contrary, Russia has self-excluded itself from the European security order. While with Putin, Russia seems set to remain on its confrontational towards the West, in a post-Putin scenario, however, a democratic Russia may be much less likely than the deterioration of the Russian regime into a rogue state or a failed state and the disintegration of Russia itself.

At the time of writing, it is difficult to envisage the possibility of a peace that would guarantee the end of the war through an armistice agreement or the capitulation of one of the parties, or at least the end of hostilities.<sup>16</sup> First, without victory in sight President Putin does not want to end the fighting, as this would amount to having to accept a strategic defeat and possibly the end of the Russian regime. Second, President Zelensky will not accept to sit at the negotiating table to risk losing Ukrainian territory. Nor can Ukraine stop fighting, as it would cease to exist as a sovereign state and as a nation. Third, there is no credible international mediator: while Turkey has facilitated a grain exporting deal, in July 2022, to mitigate the global food crisis, as a NATO member it is seen with suspicion by Russia.<sup>17</sup> China, on the other hand, despite abstaining in the United Nations (UN) resolutions on Russia's invasion has little credibility as a mediator due to its ambiguous stance vis-à-vis Moscow and its 'no limits' friendship treaty with Russia.

### **THE US-EUROPEAN TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY COMMUNITY**

The stability of the Euro-Atlantic area has been founded upon the unity and cohesion of the transatlantic security community. After the Second World War, this transatlantic unity developed between the US, Canada, and Western European countries when they created the Atlantic Alliance, in 1949, to guarantee the protection of Western Europe against

the expansionism of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the commonality of values and shared interests facilitated the development of a transatlantic security community. In its original conception, the transatlantic security community emerged from what Karl Deutsch, in 1957, defined the 'pluralist security community' – 'a set of states that has integrated and in which there is an effective guarantee that the members of the community do not physically fight each other and resolve their disputes by other means'. Security among members developed from a 'feeling of community' that sustains 'institutions and practices strong enough to sustainably secure expectations of peaceful change'.<sup>18</sup> A security community thus reduced the security dilemma between its members and mitigates strategic competition between them.

Given that a security community is characterized by its normative nature, a common ideational vision of the international order, and the resolution of disputes between member states without resorting to military force, a security community is distinct from a classic alliance and, moreover, can exist in the absence of a formal alliance.<sup>19</sup> Decisively, its members converge regarding the contours of the international order, the hierarchy of threats and the identity of adversaries, the interests and a common vision that sustains the security community. This strategic convergence is crucial in moments of power transition and redefinition of regional orders. This was the case at the end of the Cold War, in 1991, when the bipolar world order was substituted and the existing European security architecture was extended, through NATO's enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe into a wider transatlantic security community.

In the last decade or so, however, this transatlantic security community came under considerable strain. President Barack Obama, who assumed office in 2009, after the serious transatlantic crisis over the Iraq war a few years earlier, pursued a policy of 'leading from behind' in the Euro-Atlantic security area and expected the European

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allies to take the lead in dealing with crises of Libya, Syria, and Crimea. In the case of the latter, after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, in 2014, the US delegated to Germany and France the mediation of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and expected Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel to assume a leading role.<sup>20</sup> This partial US retrenchment from Europe was done

in an amicable way and explained through America's 'Asia pivot' in the early 2010s as a response to China's rise. At the same time, though, this retreat facilitated Russia's revisionist strategy of supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad militarily in the ongoing civil war and in its annexation on Crimea.

But Russia's annexation of Crimea, in 2014, was in part a gamechanger for NATO's deterrence and defense posture. In response to the annexation, the US increased its

military presence in Europe and together with Great Britain, Canada and Germany deployed four multinational battalion-sized battlegroups through NATO's enhanced forward presence, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and NATO's tailored forward presence, in the southeast of NATO territory, in 2016. President Donald Trump, Obama's successor, pursued a different transatlantic policy.<sup>21</sup> Despite upholding America's military deployments in Eastern Europe, he accused the US's European allies of security freeriding regarding the agreed upon 2% GDP for defense spending and considered withdrawing the US from NATO.<sup>22</sup> In different ways, both the Obama and the Trump presidencies weakened the transatlantic link, to the extent that some questioned the end of the transatlantic alliance and the erosion of the transatlantic security community.<sup>23</sup> Obama charmed the European with personal empathy, but his geopolitical heart seemed to be in the Asia-Pacific focused on the emergence of China. Trump criticized NATO as an obsolete institution, raised suspicion in European capitals about the administration's commitment to the US security guarantee contained in NATO's Charter article 5 and multiplied the conditionalities on US collective defense guarantees, including ordering the withdrawal of US troops from Germany. This weakened the transatlantic security community and unsettled the European allies. In turn, former US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis recognized the importance of the transatlantic security community and the Alliance's role in defending the Euro-Atlantic security order when he stated, in his resignation letter, that

'our strength as a nation is inseparable from the strength of our unique global system of alliances and partnerships. The United States remains the indispensable nation of the free world, but we cannot protect our interests or play that role effectively without strong alliances and without respect for our allies'.<sup>24</sup>

When Joe Biden became US President, in January 2021, it was thus far from clear that the transatlantic security community would recover. To be sure, President Biden's tone differed considerably from his predecessor, but the new administration still identified the Indo-Pacific as the United States' strategic priority, with consequences for the transatlantic relationship. But upon assuming office, President Biden committed to strengthening transatlantic unity, declared that America was 'back' to rebuild America's alliances, and recognized that to guarantee the international status quo and US's global role, it needed its allies to counterbalance Russia and China, whose mutual strategic partnership had strengthened in recent years.

Thus, the transatlantic allies were recovering the Alliance's strategic convergence, and albeit the double shock of the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan, in August 2021, and the surprise signing of the US-UK-Australia AUKUS Treaty, one month later, and the temporary unease it caused between allies, the Alliance recovered its momentum. This was all the more crucial in the run-up to the war and the increasing global power transition that was crystallizing.

In this context, the West's reaction to the outbreak of the war confirmed the strategic convergence of the transatlantic security community and in the months that have followed Washington and its European allies have managed to keep a decisive unity in their joint responses to Moscow's actions. As a consequence of the West's unified response, uncertainty about Ukraine's status as a member of the transatlantic security community has been clarified: Ukraine shares the West's interests in preserving the liberal international order and converges strategically, at the highest price in the loss of human life, in opposing the offensive revisionism that Russia's military invasion has unleashed over its territory. Rather than persisting as a neutral state in a condition of strategic blurring, Ukraine has become the front state between the West and Russia. And rather than giving in to demands to demilitarize, like in 1994 when Ukraine gave up the nuclear arms stationed on its territory, in the Budapest Memorandum, post-war Ukraine will rearm and likely become a strong military power. To ensure lasting stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, Ukraine should become a NATO member and an EU member at the earliest possible stage.<sup>25</sup>

#### **THE US-EUROPE RELATIONSHIP AND NATO REVITALIZED**

The revitalization of the transatlantic alliance preceded the war in Ukraine and began when the Biden administration took office. But one of Russia's unintended consequences of its invasion of Ukraine was reinforcing NATO's revitalization. When the Biden administration took office in January 2021 it was then already clear that US support for Ukraine was necessary for different reasons: 'Russia's war is against the West, not just Ukraine; the future of a rules-based international order depends on Russian withdrawal from Ukraine; and the United States has a moral commitment to both Ukraine's fight for independence and democracy in general'.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, when Russia's invasion started, on 24 February 2022, the US and its allies coordinated their response and started sending arms and equipment individually to support Ukraine militarily. But NATO's direct involvement in the war was considered a red line for the Alliance even though President Zelensky requested a no-fly zone enforced by the Alliance.<sup>27</sup> The allies were united in stating that they would support Ukraine's defensive war strategy, deliver weaponry and train Ukrainian soldiers, but withhold from considering a no-fly zone over Ukraine or deploying NATO troops on the ground as this would have turned NATO into an active part in the war.<sup>28</sup> NATO's goal is assisting Ukraine in its legitimate right to self-defense while keeping transatlantic unity and strengthening Europe's deterrence, but avoid escalation towards a direct confrontation with Russia, or between NATO and Russia.

To coordinate military assistance to Ukraine, US secretary of defense Lloyd Austin set up the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which first met on 26 April 2022 on the Ramstein Air base in Germany and gathered over 40 allies to consult over providing military assistance to Ukraine, and which has met regularly ever since.<sup>29</sup> As the war drags on,



the allies and Ukraine have continuously discussed and coordinated the delivery of more sophisticated weapons systems, from air and missile defence, anti-tank and artillery systems and drones to heavy arms delivery, including combat tanks to Ukraine.<sup>30</sup>

NATO's unity during 2022 has been impressive. From having considered NATO as 'braindead', in 2019, the French President Emmanuel Macron now considered NATO to have revitalized through electroshocks.<sup>31</sup> Finland and Sweden, traditionally neutral countries, which had intensified cooperation with NATO after Russia's annexation of Crimea, became candidate countries for membership at the Alliance's summit in Madrid, in June 2022.<sup>32</sup> At this summit, NATO approved its New Strategic Concept, defining Russia as 'the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area'.<sup>33</sup>

To counter Russia's aim 'to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation', the allies committed to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defense posture in Eastern Europe and accelerate the development of forces, capabilities, and infrastructure. The number of troops in the four existing battlegroups in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania deployed in 2017 were increased and four new multinational battlegroups were deployed to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. The US for its part significantly increased its military presence in Europe, with additional troop and capabilities deployments to different NATO allies and with the establishment of a permanent headquarter in Poland.<sup>34</sup> The Alliance adopted a new NATO Force Model, increasing the scale and readiness of its troops.<sup>35</sup> Member States pledged to reach 2% of GDP defense spending targets faster and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that the Defence Investment Pledge of 2% of GDP in defense by 2024 was 'increasingly considered a floor, not a ceiling'.<sup>36</sup>

The question for Europeans will be how to guarantee that the US remains committed to the formula that America's security is intrinsically linked to Europe's security. This means first, that the US reinforces its troop and capabilities presence in Europe to an unprecedented degree since the end of the Cold War; second, given that Washington will not re-pivot away from the security engagement underway in the Indo-Pacific in the global competition with China, Euro-Atlantic democracies need to cooperate more intensively with Asian democracies, for example, through the Transatlantic Quad and the Indo-Pacific Quad formats, to prepare for two simultaneous conflicts, in Europe with Russia and in the Indo-Pacific with China.<sup>37</sup> Third, the US needs to support Europe's efforts for a European defense.<sup>38</sup> Ten months of war have laid bare Europe's grave insufficiency in guaranteeing for its own security and decide about questions of peace and security without the full commitment of the US. To overcome this situation,

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Europeans need to get serious about contributing more significantly to their own defense, through a combination of national and joint development of capabilities and procurement, and the US needs to lay its own ambiguity to rest on where it stands on European defense. While Europe's own insufficiencies has rendered the long-standing debate on European (defense) autonomy somehow secondary, the US should play a supportive role towards a European pillar in NATO as the most effective way to increase Europe's security.<sup>39</sup> As this is a long-term process, Europe may well become more dependent before it gets less dependent on the US for its security and defense. Europeans will need to increase defense cooperation among EU members to a serious level to reduce fragmenting defense efforts and production costs and foment joint defense procurement.

But emerging divisions between Poland and the Baltic states, on the one hand, and Germany and France, on the other, over how to provide political and military support for Ukraine make it difficult to envisage concrete development in European defense cooperation. While the Eastern European countries advocate providing Ukraine quickly with the military equipment it requests, promoting quick accession talks for Ukraine's EU membership and applying tougher sanctions against Moscow to accelerate Russia's defeat in the war, Berlin and Paris have taken a more cautious and hesitant attitude regarding the delivery of weapons and being less outspoken about Ukraine's victory and the terms of the outcome of the war.<sup>40</sup> Chancellor Scholz and President Macron merely stated that 'Ukraine must not lose this war' and 'Russia must not win the war' rather than openly saying, like the leaders of the Baltic states, Poland or Finland have done, that Ukraine must win the war and recover lost territory.<sup>41</sup>

Regarding Ukraine's bid for EU membership while Eastern European countries and the Baltic states, for obvious reasons argue for Ukraine's quick EU accession, President Macron has suggested the creation of a European Political Community, a sort of ante-chamber without guarantee of full accession.<sup>42</sup> The EU Versailles summit declaration, on 10-11 March 2022, adopted this idea, stated that 'Ukraine belongs to our European family', a formula which due to its vagueness did neither satisfy the Ukrainians nor the Baltic or Eastern European states.<sup>43</sup>

The Eastern European and the Baltic states, in particular, have voiced their criticism of Germany's support of Ukraine which they often considered to be 'too little, too late' in terms of arms delivery to Ukraine and they have been more vocal in arguing for a speedy delivery of heavy armament to Ukraine.<sup>44</sup> To be fair, in terms of bilateral deliveries of military equipment, Germany has been the third biggest supporter of Ukraine with €2.3 billion, preceded by the United Kingdom with €4.1 billion and the US which with €23 billion remains by far Ukraine's most significant supporter, according to data as of 20 November 2022 from the Ukraine Support Tracker from the University of Kiel. In terms of total commitments for Ukraine in terms of military, financial and humanitarian aid, with its decision to provide another €18 billion as of January 2023, the EU Member States and institutions will have surpassed the US.<sup>45</sup>

These countries have in fact acted as the Nordic-Eastern bulwark against Russia's actions in Ukraine displaying keenness to assume a leadership role unlike France or Germany. Poland has not shied away from exerting leadership during the war, although for some European governments that approach might be seen as too hawkish.<sup>46</sup> The dislocation of Europe's center of gravity towards the East is bound to slow down European defense cooperation given that apart from Europe's inherent difficulty to reduce its dependence on US capabilities the Baltic and Eastern European states obviously see the US military presence in Europe as the best guarantee for their own security. Without the US as Europe's pacifier and protective nuclear umbrella, Europe would be much worse off, and Russia would try to wield its power not only over the states of the former Soviet Union but also over Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

### **THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

In reacting to the war in Ukraine, the EU's response has been impressive and, in the process, has attempted to become a geopolitical actor.<sup>47</sup> The EU and its Member States responded in a swift and coordinated manner through humanitarian and financial assistance, and military support (weapons and ammunition) to Ukraine. In October 2022, the UNHCR had registered 7.6 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe, with some 4.2 million refugees having been granted a temporary protection scheme in the EU to be able to access health care and a temporary work permit.<sup>48</sup> In a series of unprecedented decisions, as of late November 2022, the Council adopted eight sanctions packages targeted at the Russian state and economy, members of the government, Russian banks, and companies. European unity remains, Europeans drastically reduced their dependency from Russian fossil fuels at a galloping pace and EU policymaking has become more cohesive. Four days after the outbreak of the war, President Zelensky submitted Ukraine's bid for EU membership. And at the European Council on 23-24 June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova were accepted as candidate countries for EU membership.<sup>49</sup>

The EU put in practice for the first time the European Peace Facility, an off-budget instrument that reimburses member states for defense equipment they have supplied to Ukraine. As of 9 November 2022, Ukraine had received six tranches of EPF-funded military equipment and non-lethal support worth €3 billion.<sup>50</sup> To support those member states replenishing depleted stockpiles, and to boost defense cooperation the Commission put forward a proposal on joint procurement of equipment, on 19 July 2022, through the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act.<sup>51</sup> If approved, the EU would allocate €500 million of the EU budget for 2022-24. Where this equipment is to be procured, on the European market or from non-EU countries is of course subject of debate as it concerns not only competition between European defense industries but also with the US defence industry.<sup>52</sup> What is clear is that the European 'peace dividend' of the last three decades has meant that Europe's armed forces and defense industries have become underfunded and underinvested.<sup>53</sup>

The need to step up defense capabilities, to help support Ukraine and to strengthen Europe's own national defenses has rendered discussions on strategic autonomy and European sovereignty a somewhat secondary concern. NATO's role as the continent's main organization for collective defense has reignited the debate to strengthen the European pillar in NATO: the EU as a military power is not realistic and NATO is the most effective Euro-Atlantic institution to ensure deterrence and defense; NATO is the best way to keep Global Britain attached and interested in European security; if a debate on European nuclear deterrence sets off this would be best handled within the framework of the Atlantic alliance; and finally, Europe's reliance on the US nuclear and overall military deterrence has again brought home that despite timid European efforts to develop into a military power, European countries are still overly dependent on the US for its security and defence. In recognizing the renewed relevance of the transatlantic alliance, the development of a European pillar within NATO is likely to gather the allies' agreement and it is a way for Europeans to overcome a decades-long problem of disagreement over the idea of European strategic autonomy and focus on developing European defense in close interconnectedness with NATO. Reinforcing EU-NATO cooperation is one important element. While the EU's Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022, and NATO's New Strategic Concept, adopted in June 2022, already envisaged closer institutional coordination, the war in Ukraine has strengthened the need for the strategic partnership to boost EU-NATO cooperation on capabilities, interoperability, and military mobility.<sup>54</sup>

The return of war to Europe has also forced the EU Member States to adapt their own national security and defense policies in helping to provide assistance to Ukraine and



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more decisively, to ensure their security and defense policies adapt to the new geopolitics. Germany is a case in point. In an unprecedented move, and after weeks of criticisms by its allies for Berlin being too hesitant regarding Russia, Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a radical change in Germany's security and defense policy which, if fully implemented, will transform Germany into

a military power and a strategically thinking actor. In response to the outbreak of Russia's aggression, and in a major policy reversal, Scholz enabled weapons delivery to Ukraine by ending Germany's restrictive policy which prohibited sending defensive weaponry to conflict regions. On 27 February, the Chancellor delivered a remarkable speech to the Bundestag which quickly became known as the *Zeitenwende* speech, meaning a turning point or watershed moment. He condemned 'Putin's war' as 'an unjustifiable attack on an independent country, on the peace order in Europe and in the

world' and a 'watershed era' which would change the world.<sup>55</sup> Scholz announced major changes in Germany's defence and energy policies and in Germany's relations with Russia. First, Germany's underfinanced armed forces, the Bundeswehr, would receive a €100 billion one-off special modernization fund, the government would now invest over 2% GDP in defence annually, procure new military equipment and step-up Germany's defence efforts on NATO's Eastern flank. If implemented, this will signify a budget increase from €45 billion to €75 billion, making Germany the biggest European military power in NATO.

Second, following up on the decision two days prior to the invasion to suspend the Nordstream II pipeline process as a response to Russia's unilateral recognition of the separatist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk in Eastern Ukraine, Scholz stated that Germany would reduce its energy dependence from Russia and diversify its energy imports and sources, building new liquefied natural gas terminals and importing fossil fuels from new countries. Third, Scholz's speech was about change in Germany's bilateral relations with Russia. Germany's *Ostpolitik* – that security and peace in Europe was not possible without Russia – and the principle of 'Wandel durch Handel' (transformation through trade) – that trade interdependence would produce democratization and modernisation partnerships would bring Russia closer to the Euro-Atlantic security order – had both failed and would no longer define Berlin's Russia policy.<sup>56</sup>

The *Zeitenwende* speech represented a foreign policy revolution for Germany.<sup>57</sup> Three post-Cold War decades in which Germany had thrived as one of the main beneficiaries of the European status quo had come to an end with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the notion of the indivisibility of European security lost its meaning: there was no possibility of returning to the status quo ante and the now emerging confrontational order with Russia suggested that European security was only possible *without* Putin's Russia.<sup>58</sup>

### **EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY ORDER AND THE INTERNATIONAL POWER TRANSITION**

The war in Ukraine may well be the first major war of the global transition of power. The decade preceding the outbreak of the war in Ukraine was marked by successive crises in Europe and the Euro-Atlantic area: the sovereign debt crisis in the eurozone, the refugee crisis, in 2015, the Brexit crisis, in 2016, the Trumpian transatlantic crisis, and the Crimea crisis, in 2014, were crises confined to the Euro-Atlantic area. These crises all significantly destabilized national economies and affected relations among EU and NATO partners, but they did not structurally change the power distribution: the US remained the prevalent power in the Euro-Atlantic area and the existing institutions were reformed or new ones were created as a response to the crises.

The war in Ukraine, in contrast, is producing a global impact. In the context of the Euro-Atlantic area the war is a conflict between a revisionist autocratic regime and democratic regimes in Europe and the US, yet at the same time the competition among the great powers for spheres of influence continues. The war affects the stability and

future order in the Euro-Atlantic order, but also the West's relationship with China, and both are interconnected. Ultimately, it raises the question of the decline of the US and the extent to which the war in Ukraine is an expression of that American decline and the US's failure in deterring Russia for assaulting its neighbour.<sup>59</sup>

NATO's new strategic concept recognizes this by including reference to China for the first time in a strategic concept and identifying China as a systemic challenger of the Alliance. NATO's partnership with the EU should be strengthened because of 'the deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order'.<sup>60</sup>

China has revealed ambiguity in its response to the war in Ukraine in trying to balance different interests and President Xi Jinping has followed an ambiguous position typical of a hegemonic leader: Xi refers to the Ukraine 'crisis', instead of a war and he has not pressured Putin to end the war.<sup>61</sup> This tacit support for Russia annuls China's neutral position, and entails questions for Europe's future security order and, more decisively, galvanizes geopolitical competition with the US in the Indo-Pacific region. China opposes NATO enlargement and shortly after the war began warned the US 'not to try to establish an Indo-Pacific version of NATO to "suppress" Beijing's rise'.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the war in Ukraine is a test case for China regarding a possible reaction from Western countries to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.<sup>63</sup>

China and Russia have been united by common interests in a bilateral relationship that falls somewhere between an axis of convenience and a strategic partnership.<sup>64</sup> As Michael Cox observed, in 2016, on the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine: [the crisis has revealed] that

'China has been prepared to ignore certain basic principles in order to maintain its relationship with Russia, while Russia has been more than willing to appease China in order to make sure it can keep the Chinese on their side. [...] a Russia under increasing siege from what it now perceives as being a permanently hostile West, and a China confronted by an America that stands as the principal obstacle to its ambitions in Asia-Pacific, have come to the not illogical conclusion that there is nothing to lose, and probably much to be gained, from moving even closer together'.<sup>65</sup>

China and Russia share at least three foreign policy interests. First, both oppose US global hegemony and want to end it; second, both aim to change the rules-based, multilateral liberal international order and replace it with a post-western and post-democratic order defined by spheres of influence; finally, in doing so they want to demonstrate that authoritarian regimes are more effective in dealing with crises than democracies.<sup>66</sup> This convergence, however, hides what Jeremy Cliffe terms 'a dangerous new reality': that of 'authoritarian states strong enough to accrue more relative power within the global system but not strong enough to found new poles of stability'.<sup>67</sup>

But the war in Ukraine has confirmed the growing asymmetry in the Russia-China relation with the balance shifting in China's favor.<sup>68</sup> Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has benefited China: due to the EU's and US sanctions, Russia has become increasingly dependent on Beijing, to sell the gas it stopped exporting to European countries and to whom it wants to keep associated to claim the support of non-western great power.<sup>69</sup> But the prolonged war has also been costly for China and exposed economic vulnerabilities given that it is the largest importer on oil and one of the largest importers of food on the global market where prices have risen.<sup>70</sup>

After Washington's long-held policy of 'strategic ambiguity' that had kept both China and Taiwan guessing, in May and September 2022 President Biden has pledged publicly that the US would defend Taiwan militarily if China invaded Taiwan.<sup>71</sup> However, with the ongoing war in Ukraine and the US war effort in supporting it, a simultaneous war on two fronts would be the worst case scenario for the US.<sup>72</sup> If one considers that the US failed to deter Putin from invading Ukraine, it is not impossible to consider that it could fail in deterring Xi from making a move on Taiwan. If such a scenario materialized the competition for power transition through which China attempts to substitute the US would really be put to the test and with an uncertain outcome, especially if a hegemonic war would be seen as its preferred mechanism of change.<sup>73</sup>

The collapse of the European security order shows that we have already entered a confrontational international disorder which is characterized by a weakening of the rules based global order, increasing ideological crystallization and an offensive contest between democracies, on the one hand, and autocracies, on the other. This new dynamic has already produced a bipolarization between the transatlantic and Asian democratic communities, 'the United States and its allies – the main conservative powers, on the one hand, and, China and Russia – the main revisionist powers, on the other'.<sup>74</sup> In this more confrontational world order, we observe the growing bipolar competition between the US and China for the future international order, a return to power politics and spheres of influence which Europe is not able to escape from.

As China's claim to global hegemony will challenge the transatlantic relationship it will be increasingly difficult for Europe to evade this bipolar power competition. Europe continues to be highly dependent on the US for its security and defense, but it also is economically strongly intertwined with the Chinese economy. The US for its turn will need its European allies on its side in the growing US-China competition, while China will vow to drive a wedge between European capitals and the US. While the recent US

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mid-term elections in November 2022 showed an unexpectedly better result for the Democratic Party and were in part seen as support for the Biden administration's transatlanticist foreign policy, the US presidential elections in 2024 may bring to the White House a less transatlantic incumbent.

For Europeans this uncertainty confirms the need to support the Biden administration in its policy of increasing cooperation between its European allies and the Indo-Pacific like-minded democratic countries in the Indo-Pacific, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand to counter China's claim to global dominance. The Ukraine war, bitter as it is, has shown that democracies are peace-loving but once attacked in their integrity will fight back ferociously and can muster great willpower together.

There are many countries in the Global South that Europe and the US should win over as equal partners. Globally, Russia's aggression against Ukraine is an assault on the UN principle of self-determination and its rules and norms-based order, and it has global consequences, affecting food and energy security well beyond the European continent. Europe and the US should not miss the opportunity to try to win over the hearts and minds of countries in Latin America and Africa on a basis of respect and persuade them that a world of conflict is of no benefit neither for them and their regional security orders nor for the Euro-Atlantic security order.

To avoid that the war in Ukraine becomes the first major war of the global transition of power it is now crucial to contain China in taking advantage of this transitional moment: with the US involved in supporting a major war effort of the first large-scale war since World War Two, China may feel tempted to challenge the dominant power and take its place as the new dominant power in the international system. The last transitional moment back in 1989 was one of 'peace and change'. Let us work towards containing that this one becomes, in the words of Robert Gilpin's seminal book, a transition of 'war and change in world politics'.<sup>75</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The war in Ukraine is Europe's war, as the future of the Euro-Atlantic security order is at stake. In the post-war order that will one day emerge, Ukraine will be firmly located in the Euro-Atlantic security structures, even if short of full EU or NATO membership. After three decades of existing as a buffer state between the EU and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, the war has acted as a catalyst to locate Ukraine firmly within the Euro-Atlantic security community. The war has consolidated the Euro-Atlantic security community and strengthened its two strongest institutions, NATO and the EU, which have converged towards united and coordinated responses to Russia's war against Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine is also the first major war in the global power transition phase international politics is undergoing. The outcome of the war and the future of the Euro-Atlantic order will have repercussions on how the US positions itself vis-à-vis China, its hegemonic contender.



The stakes for global security and the democratic security community are high: Ukraine risks losing its sovereign right to exist, Europe risks losing security and stability on its continent, like-minded democracies globally risk losing security and stability in their own regions, and the US risks losing the great power contest with China. One way of reducing the threats to the future of democracy is to strengthen it by extending the transatlantic security community towards a global democratic security community, to help contain great power revisionisms and restore international order and stability. **RI**

Reception date: 2 November 2022 | Approval date: 30 December 2022

**Patricia Daehnhardt** Researcher at the Portuguese Institute of International Relations – NOVA University of Lisbon (IPRI-NOVA) and Advisor at the National Defence Institute (IDN) in Lisbon. She holds a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is a member of the International

Association for the Study of German Politics and a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the journal *German Politics*.

> IPRI-NOVA, Rua de D. Estefânia, 195, 5.º Dt.º, 1000-155 Lisbon, Portugal | [patricia.daehnhardt@ipri.pt](mailto:patricia.daehnhardt@ipri.pt)

## ENDNOTES

**1** This paper was prepared within the framework of the Jean Monnet Atlantic Network 2.0. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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