

Ukraine, multipolarity and the crisis of grand strategies

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine has two main sources. The first is the Anglo-American desire to consolidate NATO as a vehicle for political and military domination in Europe, while demonising Russia as barbaric and aggressive, thereby perpetuating a grand imperial strategy envisaged by Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze in the late 1940s. The second is connected to the grand project of Russia envisaged under Vladimir Putin. Unable to accommodate itself on an equal basis in the new post-Cold War global capitalist order led by the USA and challenged by China, it adopted a geopolitical and nationalistic agenda of confrontation that assumes the Western economies are in decline and that Russian ethnic minorities situated outside the borders of post-Cold War Russia need to be protected, including by military means. That entails use of ethnic minorities for state geopolitical advances and, concomitantly, for class advances, ie. advances of private economic interests. Both of these grand strategies are in serious trouble. Not only have they triggered a devastating new European war with potentially catastrophic consequences for all of humanity, but they have also no constructive application in an emergent multi-polar world structure in which China plays a key economic and political role.

Introduction

Despite public and expert disbelief in the possibility of war following the Russian Federation's issuance of ultimata to NATO and Washington alongside enigmatic references to "technical military measures", on February 24, 2022, Russia carried out a large-scale illegal and massively destructive invasion of Ukraine from its own territory and that of Belarus.¹ Ukrainian military forces mounted a more effective resistance than was predicted. However, in the absence of a political agreement, Russian forces still seemed likely to eventually take Kiev and other cities and occupy large areas of eastern and south-eastern Ukraine, including land and water connections to Crimea.

As the civilian death toll mounted and the humanitarian crisis deepened, the threat of a larger war involving NATO and raising the possibility of weapons of mass destruction increased. Amid increasing media calls for more robust military support for Ukraine and demonisation not only of the Russian government but also of its people, an increasing number of U.S. politicians and officials, including former NATO Supreme Commander Philip Breedlove, called for a "no fly zone" over Ukraine and other forms of confrontation that would almost certainly

¹ On the illegality of war, see the perceptive commentary by Alfred de Zayas, "Precedents of permissibility", *CounterPunch*, 4 March 2022.

bring Russian and American forces into contact with each other. Two days before Russia's invasion Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky issued a veiled but credible threat to develop nuclear weapons and Vladimir Putin placed Russia's nuclear forces on alert. At the same time, the West enacted harsh sanctions against Russia that were qualitatively more harmful than any previous ones. While energy exports were spared, the Russian Central Bank was cut off from its foreign currency assets. Sanctions of this scope have never before been enacted against a nuclear power and could be considered an act of war.

The invasion shattered longstanding assumptions concerning the European and global security architecture. Not surprisingly, and perhaps understandably, Western media cast all blame on Russia: thus, the *New York Times* Editorial Board proclaimed that Mr. Putin and his coterie are solely and fully responsible for every drop of Ukrainian – and Russian – blood, for every livelihood destroyed and for all the economic pain engendered by the conflict.² Yet, as we show in this article, the conflict has no simple or mono-causal explanation. To be sure, certain parallels can be drawn with the 1930s when revanchist Germany, disillusioned with the liberal order, sought to resurrect its lost influence and imperial glory. By unilaterally claiming victory in the Cold War and pushing Russia out of the “new world order,” the West failed to foresee longer term consequences and to learn from its own historical mistakes. The first signs of Russia's revisionism were evident already in the 1990s, when nationalistic forces of different sorts started to contest the discriminatory balance of power and Yeltsin's failed policy. At the time, those processes were seen as marginal and not given much attention; Russia's mainstream domestic and foreign policy was generally in line with that of the West, especially since Yeltsin accommodated “shock therapeutic” neo-liberal policy packages amounting to an “economic Versailles”.³

Thus, a central underlying factor in the conflict is the Anglo-American desire to consolidate NATO as a vehicle for political and military domination in Europe while demonising Russia as barbaric and aggressive. This, as we shall see, is America's perpetuation of a grand strategy envisaged by Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze in the late 1940s. Connected to this is the attempt to reduce Russian and (especially) Chinese influence over western European markets, while preventing the formation of a security axis and deepening economic relations between Berlin, Moscow and Beijing. Overshadowing causal elements in these contexts are: a) the energy factor; b) the massive economic crisis inflicted on Western societies by the global financial crisis; c) the Eurozone crisis and the pandemic, and d) the domestic political crisis in the United States.

However, the Russian establishment and the grand geopolitical strategy it envisaged under Putin is also in crisis and co-responsible for the conflict. Failing to accommodate itself on an equal basis in the new global capitalist order led by the USA, it adopted a geopolitical and nationalistic agenda of confrontation that assumes that the Western economies are in decline and that Russian ethnic minorities situated outside the borders of post-Cold War Russia need to be protected, if need be, by military means. That means using ethnic minorities for state

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/opinion/putin-biden-ukraine-russia.html>.

³ For a comprehensive and authoritative account of this see Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Henry Holt, New York, 2007, chapter 8. See also the work by Peter Gowan and his debate with Jeffrey Sachs, the mastermind of “shock therapy”, in *New Left Review*, 1995, as well as his *The Global Gamble*, Verso, London, 1999.

geopolitical advances and, concomitantly, for class advances, ie. advances of her own private-capitalist interests. In important respects this strategy resembled Turkey's operation against Cyprus in the summer of 1974 when it extended its geopolitical presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, taking advantage of the small Turkish minority on the island. Putin's Russia – like Erdogan's Turkey today – seems to be arguing not only that NATO represents an existential security threat, but also that the country's legal international borders do not coincide with her geopolitical ones.⁴ At the same time, invoking the nationalistic agenda served well Putin's neo-liberal economic policies at home, creating the much-needed electoral and political basis, propping-up his regime over the years.

NATO and American grand strategy

The establishment of NATO and the entire infrastructure of Euro-Atlantic relations was not a predetermined process. It developed within the context of the evolving politics of Europe and Eurasia, as well as through the Marshall plan, which initially was designed partially to disengage the US from Europe while assisting Western Europeans in their attempt to rebuild their economies and thus become less susceptible to communist influence. U.S. grand strategic debates during and immediately following World War II revolved around three points of view.⁵ The first centred around the team of the U.S. president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), which saw the UN and its Security Council as the means to establish economic and political hegemony. FDR, for good measure, believed that four out of the five permanent members of the Council – that is France, Britain, China and the USA – would be in a position to isolate the USSR, thereby achieving domination of the largest and most prosperous parts of the world.⁶

FDR's strategy as originally conceived ultimately proved unworkable. China turned Communist in 1949 and the USSR carved out its own sphere of influence in eastern Europe. A second point of view was developed by George F. Kennan. In his famous "Long Telegram" and other writings Kennan asserted that, because the USSR was a fragile socio-economic and political formation that was destined to disintegrate, the United States needed only to build a strong West Germany and Japan aiming at harassing the USSR from each end of Eurasia. Kennan even predicted that, one day, the USSR would collapse, especially if the USA assisted opposition groups inside the USSR. In brief, this was Kennan's famous notion of "containment". This patient approach, however, was subtly opposed by the rising star of US politics, Dean Acheson, and his close aid, Paul Nitze, who replaced Kennan in the Policy Planning Staff. For Acheson and Nitze, containment could not work if Washington DC failed to become the centre of the free world, uniting the whole of Europe and Japan *against* the

⁴ This is the main thrust of the argument developed by neo-Islamist theoretician and, later, prominent politician in Erdogan's cabinets, Ahmed Davutoglu, in his *Strategic Depth*. For an extensive review of this work, which is juxtaposed to that of the German-educated Greek political philosopher, Panayiotis Kondylis, see Vassilis K. Fouskas, *Turkish Sub-Imperialism & Deterrence* (in Greek), Epikentro, Thessaloniki 2022.

⁵ See, Vassilis K. Fouskas and Bülent Gökay, *The New American Imperialism. Bush's War on Terror and Blood for Oil*, Praeger, Connecticut 2005, chapter 2.

⁶ One of the best accounts on this is John Lamberton Harper, *American Visions of Europe*, CUP, Cambridge 1996 pp.86 ff. See also, Melvyn P. Leffler, *The Spectre of Communism. The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1953*, Hill & Wang, New York 1984. On how the overall policy design of American imperial grand strategy took shape during WWII, see the remarkable account by Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War. The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945*, Random House, New York, 1968.

USSR on the basis of power-politics and by way of exaggerating the Soviet threat. That entailed the militarisation of containment and the permanent stationing of US troops and nuclear weapons in Germany and Western Europe, and demonising the USSR as an evil power ready to invade Western Europe. 430,000 U.S. troops (80,000 remaining in 2022) were sent to Europe in order to protect her from a communist invasion.⁷ This was the hub-and-spoke model of US global imperial governance as envisaged by Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze's famous NSC-68 document of 1949-50, declassified only in the 1970s. It entailed the relationship of each of the NATO members, with Washington DC superseding the relationship NATO members can develop with each other. Thus, no security rim among NATO members could be formed *against* the USA. NATO was Acheson's great achievement which, as a security apparatus, institutionalised Europe's dependence on the United States. Thus, the evolution of American vision of its role in European security as well as threat perception vis-à-vis the Soviet Union integrated it much deeper into European affairs than America's original post-war planners imagined.⁸ Europe and Japan would become the core partners of an American-led post-World War II capitalist order.

Following West Germany's entry into NATO in 1955 in the aftermath of France's rejection of the European Defence Community treaty and NATO's refusal to countenance the USSR's membership, Moscow felt constrained to establish the Warsaw Pact, feeling betrayed by the idea of West German rearmament and the latter's concomitant connection to the American military-congressional-industrial complex. Tense years followed, leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis when, in exchange for withdrawing Soviet missiles from Cuba, America agreed to withdraw its own missiles from Turkey. Following the euphoria over the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the alleged heralding of the end of the Cold War, promises were made to Moscow about not expanding eastwards beyond the River Oder. The German foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, for example, called on NATO to declare unequivocally that "whatever happens in the Warsaw Pact, there will be no expansion of NATO territory eastwards, that is to say, closer to the border of the Soviet Union".⁹ Moscow assumed – in retrospect naively – that NATO would stick to various promises.

The North Atlantic Treaty was in any case due to expire in April 1999. It was widely anticipated that since the Warsaw Pact no longer existed, NATO would also be terminated or at least transmogrify into a cultural organisation. Instead, following fierce debates throughout the 1990s,¹⁰ NATO expanded eastwards, welcoming Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary on board. Alarmed by NATO's expansionist plans, George Kennan, the above-mentioned architect of the U.S. containment strategy, declared in 1998 that it would be "the most fateful error of American policy in the post-Cold War era." He observed presciently that:

⁷ This, of course, was a "fantasy", as Henry Kissinger himself admits in his memoirs. Kennan was correct. The USSR in the 1940s and 1950s had no means or capacity to even look after herself, let alone invade Western Europe. This is pretty much correct today. Putin's Russia has no means or capacity to invade NATO Europe. Time and again, the threat is exaggerated, serving the purpose of further NATOisation/militarisation of Europe.

⁸ Benn Steil, *The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War*, Simon & Schuster, 2019.

⁹ Evangelische Akademie, Tutzing, 31 January 1990, (Genscher, Hans-Dietrich (1990): Zur deutschen Einheit im europäischen Rahmen, Tutzing Blätter 2, pp. 3-13.); in Federal Academy for Security Policy, n. 3/2018.

¹⁰ These debates are captured well in Vassilis K. Fouskas, *Zones of Conflict. US Foreign Policy in the Balkans and the Greater Middle East*, Pluto, London 2003. The book provides a comprehensive answer to Zbigniew Brzezinski's *The Grand Chessboard* (1997).

“I think it is the beginning of a new cold war (...). I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves (...). Of course, there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are – but this is just wrong”.¹¹

In 1999 NATO carried out an illegal bombing campaign against former Yugoslavia after having made unacceptable last-minute demands on Serbian sovereignty,¹² just as Vienna had done in 1914. It later emerged that the United States had encouraged Belgrade in its campaign against the “Kosovo Liberation Army” (KLA), when on 23 February 1998, the US envoy to the Balkans, Robert Gelbard (a career diplomat), described the KLA as “without question a terrorist group”,¹³ thus lending moral and political support to Belgrade’s campaign against the KLA terrorists. Gelbard was replaced by a banker, Richard Holbrooke, who praised the KLA only four months later, even being photographed with a gun-toting KLA combatant.¹⁴ The entire bombing campaign was a classic example of image taking precedence over substance.¹⁵ The real objective was to sustain and even expand NATO, consolidating US dominance over Europe and the Balkans at a time when it appeared (although wrongly) that the Eurozone was spearheading greater European autonomy.¹⁶ The United States has always been conscious of preventing European unity to the point of becoming a *political* unity. Bill Clinton put it as follows: “The EU is allowed to have a *separable* but not *separate* defence and security identity from NATO.”¹⁷

The attack on Serbia represented a crucial turning point for US-Russian relations. A direct line runs between it and the present conflict in Ukraine. Notified of the assault *while en route* to Washington and unable to convince Washington to halt it, Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov turned his plane around in mid-air over the Atlantic and returned to Moscow. The 78-day bombing campaign, which included deliberate attacks on civilian targets,¹⁸ was

¹¹ A comprehensive account can be found in Jordan Michael Smith, “The NATO Critics Who Predicted Russia’s Belligerence”, *The New Republic*, March 3, 2022; <https://newrepublic.com/article/165562/nato-critics-predicted-russia-putin-belligerence-ukraine>.

¹² McGwire, Michael, “Why did we bomb Belgrade?”, *International Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 1, January 2000. See, also, Fouskas (ibid), where he discusses the famous “Appendix B” of Rambouillet’s aborted accord in January-February 1999.

¹³ See Peter Gowan, “The twisted road to Kosovo”, *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, n.62, 1999.

¹⁴ This method of egging on, and then performing an about-turn, was also used to encourage the first Gulf War, when the US ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, assured Saddam Hussein that the USA had no interest in Iraq’s dispute with Kuwait, thus providing Iraq with an excuse to invade. See Parenti, Michael, *Inventing Reality*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1993, p. 164, in Mallinson, William, *Cyprus: A Modern History*, I.B. Tauris/Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2005, 2008, 2012, pp. 97-98. Peter Gowan, in his *The Global Gamble* (1999), pursues a similar argument.

¹⁵ Op. cit., McGwire.

¹⁶ See Alan Cafruny and Magnus Ryner, *Europe at Bay: In the Shadow of U.S. Hegemony*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Colo., 2007.

¹⁷ https://www.jstor.org/stable/44472151?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/08/world/rights-group-says-nato-bombing-in-yugoslavia-violated-law.html>.

condemned by Mikhail Gorbachev and it caused the previously compliant Boris Yeltsin to suspend cooperation with NATO's Partnership for Peace programme. It amplified Russia's concerns over NATO's intentions, with considerable justification, as the Afghanistan débâcle, the 2003 illegal invasion of Iraq, and the assault on Libya in 2011 testify. Moscow's intervention in Syria also needs to be understood in this context.

The 9/11 attacks, following which Russia offered the United States assistance and bases in Central Asia, provided only a brief interlude in the downward spiral of US-Russia relations. NATO continued its eastward march into the Baltic states, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and, for good measure, even North Macedonia in 2020, with the possibility of future membership for Georgia and Ukraine. In 1952 Lord Ismay famously observed that NATO was designed to "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." But at the present time the alliance exists to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the EU down, meaning within the U.S. security orbit, and insulated from China's economic influence and dependence on Russia's energy and pipeline networks.

The road to invasion

With very few exceptions the Western mainstream media and academic analyses of the present crisis have been one-sided. Attempts to understand Russian security concerns amid an expanding NATO, US unilateral renunciation of arms control treaties, and the stationing of potentially offensive short- and medium-range missiles in Romania and Poland have been for many years dismissed as apologies for authoritarianism. Yet, the origins of the present Ukraine crisis lie in the structure of the post-Cold War institutional architecture, multiple security dilemmas, poorly managed regional conflicts and the consequent revival of geopolitical-nationalistic thinking in Russia, but also in Europe and the United States, witness the Brexit and Trump phenomena, not to mention the rise of neo-Nazi aggregations and influential political parties in France, Austria, Poland and elsewhere. All in all, as we shall see, there is a manifest crisis of grand strategies employed by key international actors, especially the USA and Russia.

The establishment of Ukrainian statehood in 1991 raised the question of the disposition of Ukraine's nuclear weapons. At the OSCE conference in Budapest in 1994 the United States, Britain, and the Russian Federation signed the "Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances" which served as the basis for Ukraine's relinquishing of its nuclear arsenal. The memorandum was also later endorsed by China and France. The signatories agreed to respect Ukrainian (and Belarus' and Kazakhstan's) sovereignty and independence within existing borders and to refrain from the use of force against it. The Russian Federation signed the memorandum in the context of the afore-mentioned assurances that NATO would not expand eastward.¹⁹ Furthermore, recently discovered documents from the National Archive of the UK demonstrate that by March 1991 the US, France, Germany and the UK had reached a consensus that NATO should not expand beyond the Oder and "membership cannot be offered to Poland and others"²⁰. In reality the issue of NATO enlargement was much more

¹⁹ <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>.

²⁰ <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/nato-osterweiterung-aktenfund-stuetzt-russische-version-a-1613d467-bd72-4f02-8e16-2cd6d3285295>.

complicated and nuanced. It was influenced by domestic discussions in the United States and politically powerful defence contractors, as well as by growing pressure from Atlanticist forces in Central and Eastern Europe willing to see their countries becoming members of NATO. Even though Russia was watching these processes with growing concern, two major waves of NATO enlargement in 1999 and 2004 were undertaken. They were perceived as deeply humiliating by Russia's neo-liberal establishment. The cultivation of Russia's domestic nationalism is to a large degree the creation of NATO's and the EU's eastward expansion drives, witness the fact that Putin's quest to join NATO was turned down, and despite Russia's help to the USA in Afghanistan.

NATO's Bucharest Summit in 2008 marked another major turning-point in Russia-NATO relations. Without consulting Moscow, the alliance noted Ukraine and Georgia's "aspirations for membership" and "agreed that they would become members of NATO." This agreement represented a strange compromise between the US on the one hand, and Germany and France on the other, both of which opposed the initial American desire to open the door for Ukraine's and Georgia's formal invitation to NATO. Moscow perceived the agreement as an act of open hostility. It also coincided with the moment when threat perception was rapidly changing in Moscow. Putin's Munich speech in 2007 was the first major signal to the West that Russian strategic thinking was changing. Behind that were rising pro-Western sentiments in the post-Soviet space, foremost in Ukraine and Georgia, that Russia started to perceive as a threat to its spheres of political, economic and cultural influence. Soon after, and counting on support from Washington, Georgia's President Mikhail Saakashvili carried out attacks on the Russian garrison in South Ossetia, a contested enclave (along with Abkhazia), killing 65 Russian soldiers and wounding more than 200. Russia responded with a large-scale air, land and sea invasion, followed five days later by complete withdrawal. Western media universally and categorically depict the war as an unprovoked "Russian invasion." Yet, from a Russian standpoint, the invasion of Georgia was defensive. The European Commission concluded on the basis of an independent study that "(...) it was Georgia that triggered the war when it attacked Tskhinvali (in South Ossetia) with heavy artillery (...) none of the explanations given by the Georgian authorities to provide some form of legal justification for the attack lend it a valid explanation."²¹

Russia's annexation of Crimea and military incursions into Ukraine on behalf of ethnic Russian secessionists in Luhansk and Donetsk in 2014 similarly represented diverging visions in Moscow, Washington, Kiev and European capitals on the management of the post-Cold War order. After 1991 the European Union, the United States, and Russia competed for influence in Ukraine. Even as it stressed a common "civilisation" that now appears to be withering, Russia hoped that Ukraine could play a key role in the Eurasian Economic Union. For the United States and Germany, the absorption of Ukraine into the Western orbit represented not only a geopolitical advance but also a significant economic prize: a highly educated (and cheap) labour force, with substantial industrial infrastructure and a large agrarian sector providing global markets for much of the wheat and grains they needed. However, Ukraine's President Victor Yanukovich's indecisiveness and his ultimate decision in 2013 to reject prospective closer economic integration with the EU in favour of a financial offer from

²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-russia-report/georgia-started-war-with-russia-eu-backed-report-idUSTRE58T4MO20090930>.

Vladimir Putin and closer ties with the Eurasian Economic Union triggered upheavals throughout central and western Ukraine. Clearly, the global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis renewed Western pressures on Ukraine and other Balkan and East European states for closer economic cooperation with Western neo-liberal establishments. Certainly, the Maidan demonstrations expressed the desire of many Ukrainians for democracy – however perceived by the Ukrainian middle classes – and closer relations with the EU, which they hoped would provide a way out of the morass of corruption and oligarchic rule. In the end, however, the Maidan uprisings resulted not in greater democracy, but rather a series of chaotic processes, with very different groups and forces surfacing in Ukrainian politics, including extremist neo-Nazi groups.

As violence in Kiev intensified, Yanukovich was unable to manage the crisis and quickly lost control of the situation. Russia perceived it as a US-sponsored coup and “colour revolution”, viewing it as the most direct and dangerous challenge to its security since NATO’s post-Cold War expansion.²² Moscow considered the new wave of Ukrainian nationalism and pro-democratic movements supported by the West as a threat to both the Russian regime and Russian geopolitical interests. Russia’s decision to annex Crimea was dictated not primarily by historical revanchism (which later became an important part of the political mythology in Russia) but rather by immediate strategic concerns – Moscow could not be sure that the new political regime in Ukraine would agree to continue stationing the Black Sea Fleet in its territory and feared that Sevastopol could eventually become a NATO base.

NATO powers refused to recognise Russian sovereignty over Crimea, declaring its seizure a violation of Ukrainian territorial integrity and, hence, of international law. Russia pointed to the entirely bloodless annexation of Crimea and insisted that subsequent support for rebel secessionists in Donetsk and Luhansk came in response to what it viewed as a US-orchestrated and unconstitutional seizure of power in Kyiv that reopened ethnic nationalist divisions, giving right-wing nationalists a significant role in the government and armed forces. It therefore validated the claims to the right of self-determination for Crimeans and rendered the Budapest Memorandum invalid. While the hastily arranged referendum, in which 90% of Crimeans, according to Russian official positions, voted for Russian citizenship arguably was flawed in many respects, from Moscow’s standpoint it clearly reflected the will of the great majority of Crimeans.²³

In contrast, the situation on the ground in the Donbas was very different. The separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk reflected deep divisions within Ukrainian society and the polity, which can be traced back to the numerous partitions of Poland from 1772 until 1939, and in the way borders were drawn in the early years of the Soviet state during the Russian civil war (1917-21). These divisions intensified when Ukraine was compelled to make hard

²³John O’Laughlin and Gerard Toal, “The Crimea Conundrum: Legitimacy and Public Opinion After Annexation,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 60, 1 (2019). Here it is also worth quoting at length the statement of George Friedman, the Director of Stratfor U.S. Intelligence Strategic Advisory Institute: “Russia calls the events that took place at the beginning of this year a coup d’état organized by the United States. And it truly was the most blatant coup in history (...). About three years ago (...) I predicted that as soon as Russia starts to increase its power and demonstrate it, a crisis would occur in Ukraine.” Quoted in *Kommersant*, 19 December, 2014.

choices concerning its political, geopolitical, cultural, and economic orientation in Europe, which often resulted in a simplistic alternative between Russia and the West. Russia's position on the Donbas was not predetermined. Unlike in the case of Crimea, no quick solutions surfaced in Moscow. Russia has always viewed eastern Ukraine as an important area for its economic interests, with many local industries having direct links to Russian private and state companies. However, Moscow was aware of the risks of direct military confrontation with the Ukrainian army; thus different (and often competing) political groups in Moscow proposed different solutions to the new dilemma, ranging from military support for the separatists to diplomatic solutions. Russia initially had high expectations for the Minsk agreements, because under their conditions the Donetsk and Luhansk republics would peacefully reintegrate into Ukraine, while at the same time enjoying more autonomy and affording Moscow an important channel of influence in Kiev. Moscow hardly expected the Donbas to become a permanent problem. It was a loosely managed regional conflict from the very beginning. Moreover, it became a part of competing narratives and public policies in Russia and Ukraine that were driving further hostility between the two nations.

The new government in Kiev, led by the oligarch Petro Poroshenko, but also studded with American-appointed ministers and supported by oligarchs, reaffirmed its intention to enter NATO. The present Zelensky government rhetoric provoked even more mistrust and paranoia in Moscow. His pledges to re-take Crimea by force and intensifying domestic discourse on NATO membership were seen through the lens of potential conflict with the Northern Alliance. Although few NATO members believed that Ukrainian accession is possible in the foreseeable future, anti-Ukrainian sentiments were gradually gaining strength among the Russian leadership and military command structures. Responsible for this, among others, was the development by the Ukraine of long-range missiles with NATO's help, the procurement of Turkish UAV (unmanned planes), as well as US military help to Ukraine in the form of Javelin anti-tank guided missiles. In June 2021, Britain sent a frigate to Crimea's territorial waters, challenging Russia's sovereignty there. In October 2021, Ukrainian forces conducted their first air-strike with a Turkish TB2 drone on a D-30 howitzer in the Russian-occupied Donbas. The Zelensky regime also closed down three pro-Russian TV channels in the Ukraine, which were ran by Putin's personal friend, Viktor Medvedchuk. In November, 2021 the United States and Ukraine signed a "Charter on Strategic Partnership" in which the USA asserted Ukraine's right to secure membership in NATO. The distinguished historian—and certainly no friend of Russia—Robert Service called this decision an "immense strategic blunder" on the part of the United States and "the last straw" for Moscow. ²⁴

As a result of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the seizure of Crimea, and the continuing conflict in the Donbas, political divisions between Moscow and Kiev worsened, thereby creating preconditions for permanent instability in the region. For Russia, Ukraine was and remains the most important litmus test in her relations with the West. Realist IR thinker John Mearsheimer et al., put it as follows: "Fear is at the root of Russia's opposition to the prospect of Ukraine becoming a Western bastion at its border. Great powers always worry about the balance of power in their neighbourhoods and push back when other great powers march up to their doorsteps".²⁵

²⁴ *Wall Street Journal*, March 4, 2022.

²⁵ Michael McFaul, Stephen Sestanovich and John J. Mearsheimer, "Faulty Powers: Who Started the Ukraine Crisis?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 6. 2014. P. 176.

Certainly, one could ask why Russia fears NATO and the West, and why it perceives the movement of the Western institutional infrastructure to its borders as an existential threat. Russian threat perception is a combination of factors deriving from neo-liberal domestic politics and the new geopolitics of her foreign policy based on ethnicity which, in the end, seem to be very much intertwined. Since Putin returned to power in 2012, the Russian regime has slowly returned towards its own version of political, social and cultural conservatism, that largely rejects Western liberal values. Special attention was given to ethnic Russian communities living abroad. Security concerns have strengthened beliefs of the Russian government and incorporated these ideas into Russian strategic thinking. As outlined in the Russian National Security Strategy adopted in 2021, “Westernisation” undermines Russian “cultural sovereignty”.²⁶ This does not mean that Russia is an anti-institutionalist or inherently “revisionist” power. It means, however, that ethnic Russians should be integrated geopolitically in Russia if they are not safe outside Russia’s borders. The very same strategy proclaims that “Russian foreign policy must improve stability of the system of international relations, resting upon international law, principles of common, united and indivisible security, deepening of multilateral interaction without dividing lines and bloc logic”.²⁷ What it means to say is that Russia would accept only those international institutions where it has a voice and is considered as an equal partner, because only in this way can the interests of Russians in Eurasia be guaranteed.

The energy dimension is also very important. As a result of the extensive deployment of fracking operations, the United States has become a net exporter – against all environmental standards – of relatively expensive liquid natural gas (LNG). The oil and gas pipeline systems in operation west of Moscow, including the – now famous – Nord Stream 2, create strong inter-dependencies between Moscow and European capitals, especially Germany. This is anathema for the USA, simply because an energy axis between Moscow and Berlin with all its accompanying financial implications would have the potential to thwart American dominance of Western Europe. Any sort of opening up of Germany to Russia – as has happened in the past with the famous *Ostpolitik* of Willy Brandt, stopped with the placement of Pershing and Cruise missiles on West German soil, reminding the Germans who the enemy is – has to be prevented.

At the present time EU countries consume some 400bn of cubic meters of gas per year. More than 40% of this comes from Russia. By 2050, the EU will need an additional 240bn. EU countries are building additional gas terminals to accommodate imports from the USA, as it is deemed that Russian gas would not suffice. Currently, the EU “freedom gas” imports from the USA are 68bn, all of which is transported with LNG ships dominated by Greek and Japanese shipowners. Some gas also arrives in EU countries from Egypt, but it is not enough. It is in the USA’s interests not only to block the Nord Stream 2 project between Russia and Germany, but also to disrupt the East Med projected pipeline carrying cheap gas to Western Europe from the Eastern Mediterranean, especially from another EU member-state, the Republic of Cyprus. By sanctioning and therefore blocking off Nord Stream 2 and the East Med

²⁶ <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/QZw6hSk5z9gWq0pID1ZzmR5cER0g5tZC.pdf>

²⁷ <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/QZw6hSk5z9gWq0pID1ZzmR5cER0g5tZC.pdf>.

pipeline projects, the USA dictates energy policy to the EU, against EU interests proper.²⁸ At the same time, as a result of the present conflict in Ukraine, U.S. domestic oil and gas interests are pressing to eliminate restrictions on the further development of oil and gas reserves, on grounds of national security. From this perspective alone, this conflict is not in the class and political interests of the EU states, especially Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. Russia offers to the EU cheap natural gas compared to that of the USA, whereas the natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean can supply West European states with the additional cheap gas needed for the next 50-60 years.

The nature of the Russian ultimatum and its limits

Starting in 2021, relations between Russia, Ukraine and the West began to deteriorate dramatically, with a series of mobilisations and counter-mobilisations. In February, the top Ukrainian military commander declared that plans were being made for an offensive into the separatist republics,²⁹ and declared at the end of March that his forces were ready for action.³⁰ In March and April Vladimir Putin therefore ordered the massing of troops alongside the Ukrainian border and in Crimea.³¹ Starting in May, NATO carried out a two-month long series of “Defender Europe” exercises, “one of the largest U.S.-Army led military exercises in decades”³², involving 28,000 troops from 27 NATO countries along Russia’s borders. NATO also stepped up naval activities in the Black Sea. In the summer NATO carried out “Cossack Mace” exercises close to Crimea. In September Russia, together with Belarus, concluded a Joint Strategic Exercise, Zapad-2021, focusing on the Western Military District and Belarus.³³ In October, although largely ignored by Western media, the Ukraine military carried out drone strikes in the Donbas, although these were explicitly prohibited by the Minsk agreements.³⁴ Thus, the significant Russian military build-up in regions bordering Ukraine were carried out alongside NATO exercises and Ukraine’s amassing of troops alongside the contact line in Eastern Ukraine.

Russia’s subsequent December ultimata and force deployment could have been interpreted as a maximum pressure on both the Ukraine and the West, but without engaging in an open conflict and without exposing the whole infrastructure of economic ties with the West.³⁵ This view sought a special status for Russia, which has not been granted in the last three decades. By putting pressure on Ukraine, it drew the most visible red line, offering to build a new pan-European security order that would respect everybody’s concerns and interests. Russia intentionally issued maximalist goals in order to make a political statement and project geopolitical influence. It was not a mere diplomatic proposal. The most important part about

²⁸ See, Antonis Foskolos, “The Ukrainian background to Greek natural gas and the East Med pipeline” (in Greek), <http://ellinikiantistasi.gr>.

²⁹ <https://donpress.com/news/22-02-2021-gotovim-voyska-homchak-zayavil-o-podgotovke-vsu-k-boyam-v-gorodskoy-mestnosti>.

³⁰ <https://strana.one/news/325420-khomchak-zajavil-cto-vsu-hotovy-k-nastupleniju-na-donbasse.html>.

³¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/09/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-troops-intervention.html>.

³² <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2593494/defender-europe-21-exercises-multinational-interopability-readiness-transparent/>.

³³ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/09/23/zapad-2021-what-we-learned-from-russias-massive-military-drills-a75127>.

³⁴ <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-drone-strike-separatists-zelenskiy/31536185.html>.

³⁵ <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/russias-brinkmanship-over-ukraine-and-optimal-responses>

brinkmanship strategies is that they “succeed only if the initiator achieves his goals without provoking war”.³⁶

There are reasons to believe that at the outset Russia did not plan a full invasion, but rather sought to play a chess game aimed at bringing maximum geopolitical gain, drawing red lines and extinguishing the possibility of Ukraine becoming a NATO member. This means that a frozen conflict in the Ukrainian space, or a low-intensity conflict, was in Russia’s interests, as the country, having undefined borders, could never really join NATO or the EU.³⁷ Since the late 1980s, Russian political and economic elites have become deeply integrated into the West. After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia’s main desire was to be an equal partner with the West, something that was never fulfilled and that partially explains Russia’s frustration with the West and its institutions.³⁸ Nevertheless, Russia became an integral part of the global capitalistic system. Most of Russia’s economic and financial assets are in the West and, notwithstanding sanctions, well-functioning channels of trade and foreign direct investments were established. Although economic ties with China continued to strengthen, it was initially unlikely that China could fully replace the West: although it was becoming an important trading partner and an additional leverage for Russia’s relations with the West, it did not offer much to Russia in terms of technological development and modernisation of the economy. Although Russia accustomed itself to different sanctions, it had limited capabilities in controlling sanctions risks.³⁹ Moreover, the Russian economy has been constantly downgrading since 2013; real wages have been falling and economic reforms stumbling.⁴⁰ Any serious external shock would have shaken the economic and political situation in Russia. There was little doubt that large segments of the Russian leadership were perfectly aware of this and that Russia would have a lot to lose if it chose the path of unwinding confrontation with the West. Having said this, domestic considerations conspired to unleash aggression on Ukraine, just as capital overaccumulation crises in the West, coupled with the impact of the pandemic, conspired to unleash NATO’s and the USA’s aggressive behaviour towards Russia via arming the Ukraine and pushing the Zelensky regime to extreme provocations.

The Fog of War

Notwithstanding an ill-advised and certainly counterproductive full scale military assault, the causes are much deeper than simply “Russian aggression.” Indeed, certain parallels can be drawn with the 1930s, when a revanchist Germany, disillusioned with the liberal order, demanded back her influence and imperial glory. However, as we have shown, by unilaterally claiming victory in the Cold War and pushing Russia out of the “new world order”, the West

³⁶ R. N. Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, 40th Anniversary Revised Edition, Palgrave Macmillan, London & New York, 2020, p. 72.

³⁷ The Republic of Cyprus was, however, able to become an EU member, even though one third of it is occupied, by the clever stipulation that the occupied part would accede to the *acquis communautaire* once an agreement on unification was reached. It cannot, however, currently be proven that this figured in Moscow’s calculations, despite scattered statements here and there by Russian officials about Cyprus.

³⁸ William Hill, *No Place for Russia*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Columbia University Press, 2018.

³⁹ Ivan Timofeev, “Sanctions Against Russia: A Look into 2021”, Russian International Affairs Council, 2021.

⁴⁰ Andrei Kolesnikov, Denis Volkov, “The Coming Deluge: Russia’s Looming Lost Decade of Unpaid Bills and Economic Stagnation”, Carnegie Moscow, November 24, 2021. URL: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2021/11/24/coming-deluge-russia-s-looming-lost-decade-of-unpaid-bills-and-economic-stagnation-pub-85852>.

failed to foresee longer-term consequences and to learn from its own historical mistakes. The first signs of Russia's revisionism were already evident in the 1990s, when nationalistic forces began to challenge the discriminatory balance of power and Yeltsin's failure to stand-up to western powers, especially in relation to the break-up of Yugoslavia. At the time, those processes were seen as marginal and not given much attention; Russia's mainstream domestic and foreign policy was generally in the line with that of the West, especially since as noted above Yeltsin accommodated neo-liberal policy packages driven by the American Treasury.

Putin's authoritarian rule is, by and large, the result of humiliations Russia suffered at the hands of NATO's eastward expansion, starting with the bombing of Belgrade in March-June 1999. Yet Putin's Russia is no Hitler's Germany. The Russian regime entertains no supremacist ideology and was able to build a relatively successful globalised market economy. Putin's image had always gravitated to that of a neoliberal autocrat, a person with strong belief in the power of free market capitalism and little sympathy for democracy – a true ordoliberal, rather than neo-liberal. Few could have thought that he was ready to break all ties with the West in the name of ethnic geopolitical goals and state security concerns. There is every reason to think that Russia, Ukraine, and the West sleepwalked into this conflict without seeing and listening to each other's arguments, wrongly treating intentions and unleashing unnecessary hysteria. Christopher Clark, in his famous study on the origins of WWI, observed that great powers initiate wars when their interests are not taken into consideration by other key major actors. That was the case with Germany before World War I and even more so with Austro-Hungary. "Most important of all was the widely trafficked narrative of Austria-Hungary's historically necessary decline, which having gradually replaced an older set of assumptions about Austria's role as a fulcrum of stability in Central and Eastern Europe, disinhibited Vienna's enemies, undermining the notion that Austria-Hungary, like every other great power, possessed interests that it had the right robustly to defend".⁴¹ The dilemma that the West could not – or, rather, *did not want to* – grasp when the USSR collapsed in 1991, was that Russia was and remains a fragile state with weak institutions and no historical experience of bourgeois democracy. It lacks well-functioning checks and balances and its political and administrative decision-making is often chaotic and unpredictable. At the same time Russia was going through a painful post-empire syndrome that exogenous, more experienced actors could have managed with attention and respect. But capitalism, whether advanced or not, is not the right terrain for the promulgation of ethical policy, and American grand strategy was premised on the creation of a formidable enemy in order to keep western Europe under its grip. Thus, only power calculations matter.

Referring to the crisis of 1914, Clark observed that "We need to distinguish between the objective factors acting on the decision-makers and the stories they told themselves and each other about what they thought they were doing and why they were doing it. All the key actors in 1914 filtered the world through narratives that were built from pieces of experience glued together with fears, projections and interests masquerading maxims".⁴² That is true in regard to Russia and the West, neither of which could escape Cold War narratives. Western powers - and especially the United States - have never been able to fully disconnect themselves from

⁴¹ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Harper Perennial, London 2014, p. 561.

⁴² Ibid.

deep mistrust of Russia and accept its special role, status, and identity. By constantly demonising her as their foremost barbaric enemy, they created a European order completely dependent on NATO and NATO's doctrine of "deter forward." In turn, the ruling group around Vladimir Putin, consisting mainly of coeval KGB veterans, have grown stronger in their view of the West as the main reason behind the collapse of the Soviet Union, something that they all remember as a tragedy and a loss of an empire. They firmly believe that the West is in decline and that Russia, together with China, must recalibrate the global order. Furthermore, they started seeing economic dependence on the West as a threat to the national interest, because it makes Russia vulnerable to foreign financial and political interventions – a U-turn from Putin's thinking when he came to power. Their dreams lay in nostalgic memories of the Soviet greatness and its independent domestic and foreign policies, bar socialism. Economic and political autarky in Russia perfectly fit into their worldview, hence Western expectations that economic and other sanctions might change matters being mistaken from the very outset. Western attempts to punish Russia for annexing Crimea seem to have had the opposite effect – sanctions fortified the regime and redoubled its rejection of the West. Russia's war against Ukraine is more than just a strategic gamble with NATO. It is a strategic intent aimed at restoring Russia's position in the emerging world order after the breakdown of financialised capitalism, a position denied by the USA.⁴³

US "exceptionalism" and the emergent multipolar world

There is another important factor in the crisis, namely the growing role of China in Eurasia and the increasingly visible competition between Beijing and Washington for global economic primacy. Much has been written about the continuing US desire to dominate, despite the fact that the world is already becoming multi-polar. In this connection, let us quote George Bush Senior in 1992, at the time of the first Gulf War: "The world can, therefore, seize this opportunity to fulfil the long-held promise of a new world order [...]. Yes, the United States bears a major share of leadership in this effort. Among the nations of the world, only the United States has the moral standing, and the means to back it up [...] our cause is just, our cause is moral, our cause is right' [...] May God bless the United States of America."⁴⁴

This extreme hubris sits interestingly with what the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, warned against seventeen years earlier: "There is no future for Europe, or for Britain, if we allow American business and American industry to dominate the strategic growth of our individual countries that they, and not we, are able to determine the pace and direction of Europe's industrial advance".⁴⁵ Twenty eight years before this, as London and Washington were moving into the Cold War, the British embassy in Washington had written: "The missionary strain in the character of Americans leads many of them to feel that they have now received a call to extend to other countries the blessings with which the Almighty has endowed their own".⁴⁶ This missionary strain has recently led to America withdrawing

⁴³ In this connexion, the influence of Alexander Dugin's *The Foundation of Geopolitics* (Moscow 1997) is relevant.

⁴⁴ Bush, George, "The Hard Work of Freedom", in O'Tuathail, Geraóid, Dalby, Simon and Routledge, Paul (eds.), *The Geopolitics Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998.

⁴⁵ Guay, Terence and Callum, Robert, "The Transformation and Future Prospects of Europe's Defence Industry", *International Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 4, Chatham House, London, London 2002, p.771.

⁴⁶ Telegram from the British Embassy in Washington, commenting on the Truman Doctrine, 14 March 1947, printed in *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series 1, Volume XI, No. 62.

unilaterally from the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty, the Open Skies treaty, and the intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) treaty, claiming without evidence that Russia was violating them. Exceptional – a euphemism for illegal – behaviour, however, can hardly be an excuse for breaking the law, whether it involves ignoring the United Nations or withdrawing from treaties. America’s continued global leadership depends to a considerable extent on keeping Europe on a tight leash. The Ukraine crisis also provides the United States with an opportunity to distract attention from its domestic problems, mostly connected with its continuing de-industrialisation, an exploding national debt that has surpassed \$30 trillion, and deepening polarisation and political instability. China, in this respect, looms large and economically dominant in Eurasia, especially because of its sheer outward investments, technological prowess and the Belt & Road Initiative.⁴⁷

By 2021, China, excluding Hong Kong, had built over \$4 trillion in foreign exchange reserves, the largest in the world (Germany and the USA are far behind). Today, China is the USA’s largest creditor, holding some \$1.5 trillion of US debt, with Japan a close second. This means that 1/11 of the US GDP is held, in the form of paper via the T-bills system, by the Chinese state. Further, because of the weakening of the US dollar and the social economies of the Euro-area, especially during the pandemic, more and more countries have diversified their reserves, denominating them in currencies other than the dollar and the Euro. For example, The Bank of Ghana took the decision to allow banks to quote Yuan rates and sell the Chinese currency to West Africans. In 2014, a year after the launch of the Belt & Road Initiative, China began heavily financing its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, cajoling Germany, France, Britain and Italy to join, thus partaking in the economic reshaping of the entire Eurasian continent under Chinese leadership. The US mission in Europe is to stop this, keep NATO united and keep Europe under US domination by way of waving the flag of a permanent Russian threat. Western powers, under pressure by the US, began undermining Chinese acquisition of assets in Europe, Eastern Europe, Australia and elsewhere. Australia blocked a vast land sale to a Chinese-led consortium and Germany withdrew approval for the \$1 bn takeover of chip equipment “Aixtron” by a group of Chinese investors. The value of Chinese overseas acquisitions announced only in the first nine months of 2016 totaled nearly \$200 bn, representing a real danger to traditional US interests and transatlantic cohesion. Chinese investments in infrastructure, logistics and asset acquisition, including acquisition of bankrupt factories in Turkey, the Balkans and Eastern Europe, is phenomenal. From the Greek port of Piraeus and the construction of roads and bridges in Turkey to investment deals in Serbia, North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania, the list is long and convincing enough to disallow any doubt as to whom, among others, this war over the Ukraine damages.

The Ukraine crisis is obviously not in China’s interest, because it threatens geopolitical destabilisation in Eurasia and adds more unknowns to Beijing’s Belt and Road initiative. China cannot play a role in managing Euro-Atlantic security, thus remaining largely dependent on processes she cannot control. The war disrupted Chinese business, operations and logistics, although in the scramble for post-conflict contracts it is expected that Chinese companies will be key bidders. Russia has tried to use its relations with China as leverage in the current situation. Moscow aligns with Beijing in its willingness to put extra pressure on the USA, but

⁴⁷ See, in particular, Vassilis K. Fouskas and Bülent Gökay, *The Disintegration of Euro-Atlanticism and New Authoritarianism. Global Power-Shift*, Palgrave, New York, 2019.

Beijing has been very cautious in taking overtly pro-Russian positions, witness its neutral position in the UN.

Final touches: the EU as the economic auxiliary of NATO

The EU has lost many opportunities in the past 30 years to disengage from the USA's security grip and follow an independent foreign policy and security path. One big example is the second Gulf Crisis of 2003. Whereas "old Europe" opposed the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, it failed to follow through in its opposition to war and ended up tethered to America's hub-and-spoke arrangements. After all, the entire security architecture of Europe rests on America's military command structures and nuclear weapons embedded in Europe since WWII. Thus, the best the EU can do is to work as NATO's economic auxiliary in economic reconstruction projects that follow the destruction caused by wars, while countries such as Germany, Britain, Italy and France have also opportunities in promoting profitable contracts for their defence and pharmaceutical companies raising their shares in the stock market. But as we shall see below, even this becomes hard to achieve in the face of the US strategic need to contain China.

Ever since Mackinder's geopolitical obsession with preventing an alliance between Germany and Russia, the Anglo-Saxons have sought to frustrate both European unity and an independent European approach towards Moscow. A contemporary example of this obsession comes from the British Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, in 2002: "NATO is and will be the only organisation for collective defence in Europe."⁴⁸ Entrapped in the Cold War grand strategy of Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze, which saw the militarisation of containment and the march forward of the USA to spread the values of western civilisation by way of demonising an enemy in perpetuity, the United States seeks to provide NATO with a purpose and to repair the disunity caused over the disastrous failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. The weaker Europe's political cohesion under Germany's or France's primacy, the better for NATO, which explains why the UK and the US strongly supported EU enlargement along neoliberal economic lines, in the expectation that the more unwieldy the European Union, the more likely it would be that Brussels would follow NATO/US grand strategy towards Russia. In this connection, one of the first things that Poland did on membership of the EU was to order 3.5 billion dollars' worth of Lockheed F-16s, rejecting French and Swedish offers. Russia's war in the Ukraine united artificially the EU under America's grip, **but** did not unite the EU as an independent political force dealing with the USA as a sovereign entity.

American and British military contractors maintain a vested interest in selling arms under the NATO rubric. Similarly, opposition to the Nord Stream gas pipelines, with the help of its Polish and Baltic cheerleaders and internal German disagreement, meant that the United States could export its dear LNG ("freedom gas") to Europe.⁴⁹ It is already evident that after Russia's invasion into Ukraine there will be little alternative left. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has declared an end to the special relationship with Russia while announcing a massive increase

⁴⁸ Op. cit. Guay, Terence and Callum, Robert, p. 775.

⁴⁹ On this point, see the perceptive account by Ksenia Kirkham, "The paradox of the New Great Game: do Europe and China need more pipelines from Eurasia?", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, v.24, n.1, January 2021.

in the defence budget of 100bn Euros.⁵⁰ That means Germany and the rest of the EU must rapidly diversify their energy supplies in conjunction with the afore-mentioned expansion of the U.S. oil and gas industry over the last decade. Nord Stream 2 was always a “red line” for the German state and export-oriented industrial cartels, which explains why not only Angela Merkel but also the new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz always resisted sanctions. For the former, NS-2 cements German position as Europe’s energy hub. For the latter, its competitiveness would be greatly diminished if compelled to import more expensive American LNG. Hence the sanctions on NS-2 and the withdrawal of its certification by the Germany government at the end of February 2022 challenge Germany’s European primacy and threaten to disrupt more general relations with Europe’s largest consumer economy.

Trade between Russia and China has reached new highs as tensions with the West have increased. In 2021, trade between them reached a record of \$146.88 bn, up 35.8% from the previous year. Coupled with an increase in the co-financing of mega projects in energy, such as the \$55 bn Power of Siberia-1 natural gas pipeline, as well as the establishment of regular joint military exercises in various theatres and tension zones in Eurasia (Taiwan, the Caucasus), Russian-Chinese cooperation has the potential of drawing in other Eurasian powers, such as Turkey, Pakistan and Iran. The US has no response to this, and the more it continues the military build-up in the Ukraine-Belarus zone and the South China Sea, the more China and Russia will coalesce, leaving Europe powerless, caught between the two superpowers, and yet an extended, potentially, war theatre whose societies, additionally, are subjected to enduring regimes of austerity.

Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly called for “strategic autonomy.” However, EU initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation on Defence and Security (PESCO) designed to exclude non-European firms and foster the development of an autonomous military-industrial complex are very modest, hindered by intra-European divisions and strongly resisted by Washington, which seeks to maintain primacy over an integrated and highly lucrative transatlantic armaments market dominated by American firms. The EDF provides for \$13 bn for 2021-27 compared to a 2003 American military budget of \$768 bn. Germany’s determination to increase her defence spending serves both German and NATO interests, because the German army will remain under US command structures and institutions, while boosting US military power in Europe and US defence industry under joint consortia of military production.

This development, which is a direct consequence of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, preoccupies France. The recent nuclear submarine deal with the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, which involved scrapping a \$56 bn contract with France without even notifying the French government until it was publicly announced - and then described by Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian as a “stab in the back,” – indicates both symbolically and concretely Europe’s continuing subordination to the United States. Here it is also important to emphasise the challenges that the increasingly unstable and polarised domestic political environment now place on American negotiators, certainly part of the long run calculations being made in

⁵⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/german-chancellor-holds-speech-on-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/av-60934505>.

Brussels, Berlin, and Paris. Hawkish policies towards Russia and China provide one of the few areas of agreement among congressional Democrats and Republicans.⁵¹

Both the suddenness and the magnitude of the crisis mean that it is too early to make predictions. From the standpoint of Washington, Russia's invasion serves to consolidate NATO and Atlanticism more generally, prevent an axis between Moscow and Berlin, disrupt China's Belt and Road overtures in Europe, and clear the way for resurgent LNG exports. But this grand strategy is locked into Cold War perceptions and risks a further loss of legitimacy. Russia's grand strategy, too, is bankrupt: having adopted a harsh neo-liberal economic policy at home, it now seeks what appears to be an elusive domestic consensus via the pursuit of a geopolitical agenda based on the protection of her ethnic minorities abroad. As with Turkey, Putin's regime sees no concurrence between the legal borders of the country and the geopolitical ones. Vladimir Putin appears to have greatly underestimated the ability of the United States to consolidate Western unity under its primacy, especially since the tactics of the American establishment was voiced by pundits well before the conflict.⁵² At the same time, Russia and China have been working closely on a number of fields well before the current crisis. In particular, the Russian regime is prepared to deal with the harsh financial and trade sanctions imposed by the West, not least because it can rely on Chinese support.⁵³ If the sanctions imposed on Russia last for long, then the damage will be collateral, likely witnessing a crippling economy in Russia accompanied with massive popular discontent and a devastating *stagflation* (stagnation accompanied by high inflation) in the West. The signs are already present in both Russia and the West. The winner, unless the unthinkable happens, that is a nuclear holocaust, will be China. Our world is multipolar and China, India and South Asia in general represent the most significant caucus of capital accumulation and human resources.

The Minsk II agreements, negotiated by the OSCE, France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine in 2015 provide one means of resolving a conflict that has led to the deaths of more than 13,000 people before the invasion and some thousands more since February 24. The agreements produced a ceasefire (not always respected) and the withdrawal of heavy weapons. Ukraine agreed in principle to a federal constitution that would devolve greater autonomy to the Russian areas of eastern Ukraine and allow them to exercise a veto over Ukraine's

⁵¹ There is some evidence from his previous diplomatic encounters with Vladimir Putin that Biden himself sought to reduce the level of conflict with Russia if only as a means to enhance the economic and political containment of China. Throughout 2021, for example, Biden resisted sanctions on NS2 reflecting his desire to stabilize the European theatre and solidify relations with Berlin. Yet, Biden's inability to pursue his domestic agenda and his chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan has gravely reduced his stature, further limiting his ability to resist the hawkish consensus, but rather providing incentives to escalate the crisis.

⁵² For instance, in December 2021, John Deni, a researcher at the Atlantic Council, NATO's de facto think tank, argued that the United States should refuse to negotiate with Russia. While noting that a war would be "bloody for the combatants" and provoke a refugee crisis, it would nevertheless "forge an even stronger anti-Russian consensus across Europe", provoke "another round of more debilitating economic sanctions", and be "likely to spawn a guerrilla war" that would "sap the strength and morale of Russia's military while undercutting Mr. Putin's domestic popularity and reducing Russia's soft power globally". See, John Deni, "The Strategic Case for Risking War in Ukraine," *Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2021.

⁵³ In addition, for more than 15 years now, Russia took care to move its financial holdings and transactions away from the dollar zone into China's renminbi and the Euro.

membership in NATO. However, Zelensky has failed to follow through on these commitments and the Biden administration would encounter massive domestic resistance if it pressured him to do so.

An alternative to Minsk II is a formal guarantee of neutrality for Ukraine. Such an arrangement would effectively institutionalise the *status quo*, sanctioning Russia's political aim achieved through an illegal military invasion. Coupled with a genuine commitment on the part of Washington and the EU to compel Kiev to participate in the Minsk 2 process and to agree to a federal state guaranteeing the rights of all Ukrainians, it could provide a basis for de-escalation, even if significant disagreements would remain. Such a solution, moreover, could benefit most Ukrainians. It is a necessary – although of course not sufficient – step towards enabling the Ukrainian people to overcome growing impoverishment, ethnic conflict, and increasing corruption that was in no sense alleviated by their dependence on the EU, the United States, and the International Monetary Fund after the ouster of Yanukovich in February 2014. However, as the casualties mount and refugee waves pour into neighbouring countries, no sign of any such initiative is in sight. What we are witnessing at the time of writing (8 March 2022) is military assistance to the Zelensky regime on the part of NATO powers in order to resist Russia's military encroachments and strengthen its hand in the negotiations with Russia. Times have changed but imperialist rivalry persists.