WHITE PAPER

In Search of a European Security Order After the Ukraine War

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The Western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought cause for optimism—if not triumphalism. NATO, at least over the short term, appears united and far from "brain dead." Western allies have gradually ramped up military support to Ukraine to a level where it has become capable of withstanding Russian aggression. And, in an act that would have been unthinkable prior to the war, the European Union has granted Ukraine candidate country status, even if full membership in the bloc remains many years away.

Yet these victories, both tangible and symbolic, cannot substitute for the need to envision the contours of the future European security order. Such a task is evidently difficult, even more so given that the outcome of the Ukraine war remains uncertain. A negotiated settlement remains elusive, at least in the near term. Both Kyiv and Moscow continue to hold maximalist positions and all parties believe that time is on their side. But these immediate dynamics do not obviate the fact that a new continental order must eventually emerge—one which accounts for both ongoing global shifts and enduring strategic realities.

The current trajectory of events places the European continent at serious risk of either military escalation or a long-term standoff. Both scenarios would spell devastating consequences for Ukraine—and unacceptable risks for Europe more generally. Deterrence alone does not offer an ironclad solution that can guarantee the security of all parties. Meanwhile, the longer the war goes on, the more severe the strain it will put on Western unity and the more difficult it may become to chart a path toward a new and more durable European security order.

The time to begin envisaging the broad contours of a new order is now. Such a task will require an appreciation of the complex dynamics that shape Russia's perception of its security environment and national future, an openness to gradual confidence-building measures that can substitute for the absence of agreement on the core principles underpinning the order, and far-sightedness regarding Europe's place in U.S. grand strategy in an increasingly multipolar world.

The Sources of Russian Conduct

Many observers were caught by surprise by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They may have calculated that the forces gathered at the Ukrainian border in February 2022 were insufficient to attempt a hostile takeover. Or perhaps the deep historical and demographic connections between the two countries made a state of war between them unthinkable.

But the reality is that Europe had been on a path toward war for some time. NATO's eastern enlargement has always been a concerning issue for Russian officials, a concern that transformed into a red line the further east the alliance expanded. As Michael Mandelbaum put it in a Council on Foreign Relations meeting held last year, this was not sound policy not only because it was unnecessary but because it "turned Russian opinion—not just elite opinion but mass opinion—against the West, against the United States. It made anti-Western policy the default of Russian foreign policy." This had obvious consequences for Europe as well, not least because it helped to erase the nascent hope of forming a common European security order after the fall of the Soviet Union.

While the seeds of the current conflict can be found in the events surrounding the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, relations between Moscow and Western capitals took a decisive turn after the 2013-14 Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine. Those events forced the

Russian leadership to conclude that recognition of their country's great power status could only occur by opposing the West rather than forging a partnership with it.

Over subsequent years, Russian and Western officials largely talked past one another. Western countries insisted that Russia must respect Ukraine's right to pursue membership in Western institutions, while positing the full implementation of the Minsk agreements (aimed at ending the Donbas war) as a prerequisite for restoring "business as usual" with Moscow. The Western position was that, since Ukraine was a sovereign state, no third country should be able to exercise a veto over mutually beneficial cooperation between it and the West. Russia, by contrast, believed that it held, effectively, a veto by proxy—were Kyiv to grant a degree of autonomy to Ukraine's Russian-speaking population in the east to weigh in on important foreign policy questions. Unable to obtain that veto through diplomatic and political means, Putin chose to exercise it on the battlefield.

Assertions that Russia launched this war purely due to imperialistic chauvinism, rather than security concerns over the expansion of NATO, miss the mark for at least two reasons. First, NATO enlargement up to Russia's border is pertinent not only for its security implications but also because of its symbolic power—namely, the deepening perception that the West was committed to creating a European order that largely excluded Russia. Western assertions that the new order was based on the principle that states have the right to choose their orientation rang hollow, as Russia's flirting with the idea of joining NATO went nowhere. Second, monocausal explanations never capture the complexity of events, and it remains entirely possible for imperial powers to pursue expansionist policies for what they believe are defensive reasons.

Nonetheless, there is an important grain of truth in these accounts. For Russia, the question of Ukraine's geostrategic orientation concerns not only Moscow's agenda-setting power within the European security order. It also relates to the centuries-old and still-unresolved question of where the boundaries of the Russian nation lie—including whether all Eastern Slavs form, in some spiritual sense, a single people. While the West can theoretically engage with Russia on the former issue, the latter issue is purely for Russians to decide, whether they are content to be a nation-state within a Westphalian order of nation-states or identify as a civilizational state and thus challenge the existing nation-focused paradigm and its norms.

Disputes over Europe's security order flow from the events which followed the end of the Cold War, whereas the nature of the Russo-Ukrainian relationship concerns Moscow's inability to confront the implications of the Soviet Union's demise. While these two events are often conflated in Western discourse, they are historically distinct phenomena: Reagan and Gorbachev brought the standoff between their two countries to a close in the late 1980s, whereas the Soviet Union dissolved several years afterward. The former phenomenon concerns geopolitics and international order, while the latter relates to the Russian nation and nationalism.

Confident assertions that Russia's imperial-national ambitions can be reshaped through a decisive Ukrainian military victory should be treated with extreme skepticism, as revanchism can just as easily follow humiliation on the battlefield—or, as the Versailles settlement from a century ago shows, at the negotiating table. The poorer-than-expected performance of the Russian military in the war to date has led many to question whether Russia remains a great power. But whether as a great power or a regional and

civilizational middle power, Russia remains a vast, populous, and nuclear-armed country. Moscow will invariably retain a huge stake in Europe's security system, even if it is running roughshod over the norms of the European security order today. How to accord it some kind of place in Europe's future security order commensurate with its status and self-image will remain a daunting yet unavoidable task.

A New Continental Order?

Fundamentally contrasting views of what principles should legitimately underpin the European security order—two non-intersecting circles of a Venn diagram—are a major causal factor of today's war. These include questions over the status of faultline or "in-between" states such as Ukraine, as well as the broader relationship of Russia to the continental order. Yet while addressing the dynamics of the war in Ukraine and ensuring strategic stability on the continent are both indispensable tasks, these remain intimately connected to the question of which principles should lie at the order's core.

Today, it has become difficult to imagine any agreement emerging on the nature of Europe's core principles. Indeed, one could even argue that abstract principles are inherently subject to contested interpretations, which can breed disagreement and, over time, resentment.

The European security order has also changed fundamentally since its current basic principles were agreed upon in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. While that agreement consolidated mutual recognition between the Cold War-era blocs, applying its tenets became a thornier matter when the East-West balance of power dramatically shifted a decade and a half later. Since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO has become the undisputed leading security organization in Europe. And the agenda-

setting ability, collective bargaining power, and sheer attraction of the European Union have transformed the continent's economic and political order into a Brussels-centric normative and regulatory orbit.

If the Helsinki order and its duopolistic framework hadn't already collapsed by virtue of these developments, then war—which is how international orders traditionally rise and dissolve—has ensured its apparent demise. Still, calls for all Euro-Atlantic states to respect the Helsinki order elicit less apprehension than admissions that the order has unequivocally met its end. And some of that order's basic notions, such as indivisible security, remain relevant if security guarantees, trust-building measures, and arms control arrangements between Kyiv and Moscow are to feature in any negotiated settlement. Some of the existing order's other contours, however, hold a more uncertain future.

At least in theory, there may have been scope for compromise between Russia and Western states on the notion of Ukraine's right to choose its orientation *prior* to the war. Such a compromise would have involved some kind of lengthy moratorium on NATO enlargement, which would have assuaged Moscow's security concerns while allowing the transatlantic alliance to claim that its open-door policy remained intact. However, this has become inconceivable today. With or without NATO membership, Ukraine is now effectively part of the Euro-Atlantic camp.

Relatedly, the place of neutrality or third-country status in Europe as a means of achieving security has also been called into question. Sweden and Finland now believe that NATO membership represents an important insurance policy to guarantee their security. Belarus's attempts to mold itself into a safe space for East-West dialogue were extinguished after Alexander Lukashenko's crackdown on protests following

the 2020 presidential elections. The erosion of neutrality as an attractive or even viable option highlights the fundamentally changed context of East-West relations, with implications for how a new paradigm for European security can be built.

The freedom to choose one's alignment—and the associated option of neutrality—also touch directly on the unresolved dilemmas confronting Russian nationalism. Addressing them in the current context will therefore prove exceedingly difficult, especially given shifting attitudes and political developments within both Ukraine and Russia. However, under the correct conditions, more scope may exist to gradually buttress the notion that the security concerns of all European states are legitimate. Rather than arriving at agreed-upon interpretations of high-minded principles, which appears implausible under the current circumstances, this should take the form of gradual confidence-building measures. As a first step, these could involve open-minded discussions with members of the Russian elite about the sources of conventional and nuclear risk on the continent, with an eye to achieving greater technical clarity on prohibited behavior. That the sources of Russian conduct in Ukraine are multifaceted only strengthens the case for a period of cautious trust-building.

Placing the continent on a path toward a more sustainable security order is imperative, given that the next conflict may prove even more catastrophic than the current one. Potential scenarios range from a Russian escalation in the face of Ukrainian gains, to a more assertive Moscow in the wake of a Russian victory, to a stalemate that presages a Russian military rebuild followed by a better-organized assault on Ukraine. Failure to escape from the current downward spiral also risks engendering a more complicated security landscape in Europe in the event of a major extra-regional conflict—a distinct possibility as Sino-

American tensions continue to worsen. This points to the need for a rebalanced transatlantic relationship as an important component of a future European security order.

Fostering European Autonomy

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has deepened Europe's already significant dependence on the United States. From today's vantage point, this can be framed as Western unity having been strengthened and NATO having rediscovered its purpose. However, once the glue of the Ukraine war has passed, cracks in the ranks may begin to re-emerge.

NATO expansion since the end of the Cold War has produced, with Finland's addition, a 31-member behemoth made up of different classes of stakeholders with varying interests. The alliance now essentially consists of three tiers: a globe-spanning and maritime great power, the United States (with its closely-aligned Anglo partners in Canada and the UK); a number of continental "middle powers" with different views on the desirability or viability of the U.S.-led postwar international order including France, Germany, and Turkey; and a collection of states in and around the post-Soviet space led by Poland, which serve as "regional balancers" against both historical European powers and Russia.

With its insistence on remaining Europe's primary security guarantor, America squandered the chance to help build an alternative, autonomous security order in Europe. During the Clinton and Bush administrations, Washington actively obstructed such a prospect, instead pursuing NATO's enlargement to include former Warsaw Pact countries. Maintaining the alliance from the Cold War era became an end in itself, even absent a truculent superpower as the "common enemy" such as the former Soviet Union. The exercise overshadowed the aggregation of common vital

interests, the very basis of alliance building. It put in motion the process for an intensified inter-ally competition among different factions within NATO, which has obstructed the ability of European states to construct a continental security order, whether independently or through the European Union.

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has not fundamentally altered the above picture, partly because the Russian threat is interpreted differently across the alliance. The war is regarded as an existential threat by countries in the Intermarium, which hold historical grievances (and with reason) against Russian imperialism. In Western Europe, by contrast, it is viewed as an attack on the European continent and community of nations, but not as an existential threat to the same degree. Rather, it is seen more as a significant geopolitical event on Europe's frontier with undesirable cascading effects, such as the flow of refugees, food and energy insecurity, or worst of all, the risk of nuclear escalation. Across the Atlantic, the invasion provides opportunities: the opportunity to weaken a historic, regional adversary, to re-galvanize the "liberal international order", to renew America's "indispensable" role in the world, and ultimately to reinforce the long-held strategic ontologies of the U.S. establishment.

In fact, the very concept of a *Western* world, to put it in civilizational terms, or the *democratic* world, to frame it ideologically, can be seen as an attempt to paper over the various cleavages that today lurk underneath the alliance. Closer inspection of U.S. foreign policy since World War II and continuing in the post-Cold War era reveals a deep antipathy by American policymakers toward continental middle powers, encapsulated in a two-pronged strategy meant to keep Moscow down while decentering Europe as a serious geopolitical force and precluding its return as a strategically autonomous and viable bloc.

Ironically, in recent years, a growing number of U.S. leaders—under some public pressure—have decried what they deem European free-riding and demanded that European states increase their military spending and pay more for the security guarantees that Washington provides them via NATO. Yet, there is a degree of cognitive dissonance involving America's call for more burden-sharing and the fact that only a more independent Europe with an autonomous collective security architecture, robust defense industry and financial independence from Washington would actually have sufficient ownership over its security interests to bear their apposite costs.

A more formidable Europe with an independent strategic outlook will be a better asset and a far more effective partner to America on the fundamental security challenges in a multipolar world than a Europe that has internalized its junior partner status and is weak and complacent even if compliant. In the wake of the failure of the Minsk agreements to resolve the Donbas conflict, Putin's Russia also learned that the Europeans, having outsourced their security to Washington, are not a serious counterpart in any negotiations on the important issues on the continent and that the path to any future stabilization effort would entail bilateral talks with the United States alone. This binary dynamic helped to ingrain a compromise-averse logic on all sides, which in turn led to the emergence of a situation in which war became possible.

Despite what many in the United States foreign policy establishment may claim, encouraging increased European strategic autonomy (and related defense spending) is a win-win for Washington. While there will be inevitable policy disagreements between the Americans and Europeans, a more capable Europe will be a more dependable partner to Washington in an

increasingly decentred and multipolar world—one which is becoming increasingly visible as many countries in the "Global South" reclaim their agency, defend their independent interests, and refuse to pick sides in the deepening contest between the transatlantic alliance and the Sino-Russian entente. A more autonomous European Union would also have greater leeway to manage its relationship with China—and therefore a better ability to shape security outcomes in Europe given the deepening character of the Sino-Russian partnership.

European strategic autonomy comes in many different forms, ranging from the realms of technology and industrial strategy to high geopolitics. So long as the unanimity principle in EU foreign policy reigns supreme, nothing close to "business as usual" will be restored in relations between Brussels and Moscow. Yet anything which helps to supersede the tit-for-tat dynamic of a Russia-West binary may help to clear a path toward a more inclusive and stable European security order down the road.

Conclusion

Europe today finds itself with inherited normative and institutional structures for which there are no ready alternatives.

The West's prescriptive approach for dealing with Russia—informing Moscow that the security orientation of states on its border is none of its concern—has manifestly failed to serve as a pillar of a stable continental security order. At its core, any peaceful order requires a degree of compromise. And there is little reason to compromise when one believes that the current trajectory leads to regime change in—or even the collapse of—the Russian Federation.

The most likely scenario is that the Russian Federation survives in some form. Perhaps it will

still be led by Vladimir Putin. Perhaps it will be led by an intra-regime successor who believes that the decision to invade Ukraine was mismanaged or even a strategic mistake, but who nonetheless shares Russia's traditional security concerns vis-à-vis NATO and the West. Or perhaps a new power structure will arise in Russia, albeit one that will still form against the backdrop of the country's geographic vulnerabilities and centuries-long legacy of statecraft.

On the Western side of the equation, while NATO appears re-energized and the EU makes strides toward a more "geopolitical" posture, the risk remains that intra-European divisions will reinforce Europe's dependence on the U.S. The perception—right or wrong—that France and Germany have not taken the security concerns of many Central and Eastern European states seriously only stands to fortify the status quo of U.S centrality. It also signals a general distrust that, if left unaddressed, could pose more serious rifts down the road.

As the transatlantic alliance grows and returns to its old (and hence ontologically comforting) mission, the West faces the temptation to pat itself on the back. However, greater solidarity within NATO in a crisis situation—even if it helps to break the deadlock and produce consensus on the nature of a new security guarantee for Ukraine—cannot completely address the consequences of Russia's national-political evolution. Nor can it account for the differing perspectives and priorities among a diverse group of allies and the shifting imperatives of U.S. grand strategy in a multipolar world.

The dual task of finding some way to engage with Russia in Europe and equipping European allies for a world in which limited American resources will be deployed across multiple theaters is long-term in nature. A more inclusive European security order will not emerge immediately from the ashes of the war in Ukraine. But far-

sightedness, statesmanship, and a willingness to challenge orthodoxy and entrenched structures— mindful of strategic empathy for all sides—will be necessary to set Europe on the right path.

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Acknowledgements

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