



The Ukraine War: Shocks to NATO and EU

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Russia's war on Ukraine is having enormous impact on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU), highlighting the need to rethink the security landscape in Europe and Eurasia. The brutality seen in this war is unprecedented for modern Europe, with large-scale war crimes and atrocities, refugee flows, and disruptions to supply chains, energy markets, and the provision of basic services (health, food, and housing). What was unthinkable just a few months ago—a major war in Europe with fierce pushback by Ukraine—is now a reality with broad repercussions for the trans-Atlantic space. Moving forward, policymakers must develop an architecture that responds not only to traditional hard power and nuclear threats, but also one that encompasses energy security, economic security, food security, climate, health, and migration—all issues that the current structure has proven inadequate to address in a crisis.

The End of NATO's Drift

For NATO, the Ukraine war pivots the Alliance back to its origins, namely containing Russia and responding to new challenges emanating from an increasingly unpredictable and revanchist power. The era of “resets” (Clinton-Yeltsin; Bush-Putin; Obama-Medvedev; and Trump-Putin) is over, replaced by a never-ending downward spiral in Russia-West relations. That spiral will continue until there is new leadership in Moscow—and even then, repairing the damage will remain a daunting task. This shift back to a definitive policy of containment is occurring after 30 years of drift for NATO

in which the Alliance lacked a single and consistent overarching purpose. The Ukraine war gave NATO a new *raison d'être*. Moscow's own actions reinvigorated the Alliance although the West needs to consider how it helped set the stage for the current crisis.

This drift was evident during the time of NATO's rapid expansion. After the end of the Cold War, NATO became a vehicle for European stability operations, including helping to advance democratic consolidation in Europe and Eurasia, urging economic, military, and political reforms through a notional promise of future membership in the West, and political, military, and conflict management in the Balkans. It was in this decade that the new institutions of the West truly took root, with the establishment of the European Union and initial expansion of NATO. With time, the continued growth of both organizations would be a bone of contention with Moscow. The Kremlin eventually set redlines against military ties (i.e., not just membership) between Russia's neighbors and NATO (2007) and political/economic relations with the EU (2012).

In the 2000s, NATO became an out-of-theater actor, focusing on Afghanistan and the fight against Islamic extremism in the post-September 11 environment. Moscow initially was seen as a partner in what was then called the “Global War Against Terror.” However, despite its initial acquiescence, the expansion of NATO's troop presence into Central and South Asia began to unnerve Moscow, with the Kremlin suddenly seeing the U.S. or its

allies on all fronts (Arctic, Europe, East Asia, and Central Asia).

The following decade saw a retrenchment of the Alliance from Central Asia, and an effort to focus on emerging threats: migration, instability across the Mediterranean, political polarization at home, and emerging hybrid threats. The eastern flank of NATO remained focused on Russia, while southern Europe looked towards North Africa, northern Europe focused on climate, and Washington was keen to pivot itself (and the Alliance) to Asia. This decade saw drift and friction in the West, especially as populist leaders enhanced their control over state institutions in Austria, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Yet, the February 24, 2022, the invasion of Ukraine ended that drift. Despite years of European Union discussions about developing its own strategic autonomy, the United States under the Biden administration once again took on the leadership role, both in warning against Russian aggression and then in building a resolute coalition to support Ukraine. Wary of escalating the conflict, the Biden administration urged restraint on the part of eastern European NATO members and used far-reaching financial tools to punish Russia. With time and as the true nature of the Russian military brutality on Ukrainian civilians became known, Washington and its Allies grew less hesitant in enhancing its military assistance.

The war highlighted the danger of being a country like Ukraine, caught in the middle ground between Russia and NATO. It enhanced calls of long-standing proponents for NATO expansion for

fast-track entry of the remaining Balkan states, among others, caught in the gray zone. Support for NATO in Sweden and Finland shifted into high gear, surprising even those countries' leaders. Those two countries are certainly ready for "fast-track" membership, should they decide to apply. They have the democratic credentials and ability to defend themselves. With formal membership applications forthcoming from both, NATO clearly needs to develop a strategy for safeguarding their security in the interim period between application and entry. NATO also must develop strategies to push back at Russian malign influence and destabilizing activities in other "gray zone" states (the Balkans, Georgia, and Moldova) for which membership remains unlikely.

A Big Test for the European Union

Russia's attack on Ukraine is the first major European security crisis for a new EU, one that is both without the United Kingdom and Angela Merkel, who was the EU's most effective leader and one of the few global heavyweights (beyond the U.S. and Chinese presidents) who could engage "toe-to-toe" with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Her successor Olaf Scholz lacks his predecessor's stature in foreign policy and European security, especially in the eyes of the Kremlin. He likewise is struggling to keep his government unified, to aid Ukraine, and to wean his country off Russian oil and gas.

The war is a wakeup call for Germany, and the EU as a whole, which has grown far too dependent on Russia economically and on "cheap" globalization overall. The war is refocusing Europe to address not only on its dependence on Russia, but also

on China, from where the bulk of EU consumer goods, technological components, and machine parts come. The EU's long-standing approach of trying to build good ties and stabilize the security situation by building economic ballast with its most difficult interlocutors—China and Russia—is proving far less successful than initially envisioned.

Furthermore, household confidence is down across Europe and North America, given rising gas prices, supply chain disruptions, potential food shortages along Europe's periphery, and inflation. The refugee crisis in Europe and the potential for the war to escalate or expand further West enhance uncertainty across Europe—a region that just a few months ago hoped to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Feelings of social and economic insecurity are once again permeating both sides of the Atlantic, reinvigorating the prospects of populist-style politics.

The Biden administration showed leadership in assembling an international coalition (including key U.S. Asian allies) in isolating Russia and helping alleviate human suffering caused by the war, but President Biden's leadership in this crisis is not reflected in his poll numbers or in general support for NATO, especially on the fringes of American society. Yes, popular sentiment certainly supports Ukraine, but 63 Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives or roughly one-third of the Republican caucus voted against a non-binding resolution that reaffirmed the U.S.'s unequivocal support for NATO and urged the Biden administration to promote democratic resilience in the Alliance. Clearly, the Trump faction of the U.S. Republican

Party remains a powerful force that questions the U.S. commitment to trans-Atlantic security.

Similarly, French President Emmanuel Macron faced a surprisingly difficult re-election campaign, in part due to concerns among some French voters that he has been overly focused on foreign and European affairs as opposed to domestic social and economic issues. Marine Le Pen, his main rival in the presidential run-off, won 41 percent of the vote, the highest ever for the far-right, on a platform that called to distance Paris from Berlin and Brussels (both the EU and NATO), embraced populist and anti-immigrant sentiment, and favored a new form of rapprochement with Moscow. That platform proved popular with working class voters, while 28 percent of French voters abstained from participating in the April 24 run-off. Le Pen's re-emergence and large-scale voter apathy highlight growing disillusionment among the French public with politics and the state of the country. Macron's struggles suggest that domestic uncertainty still poses threats to European democratic resilience and the Alliance, too. These trends highlight the need to expand our understanding of European security beyond the traditional military sense in which NATO includes economic security, energy security, health security, and basic human security. Migration will remain a major stressor on societies.

Finally, while there is broad consensus within NATO and the EU to isolate Russia, that consensus is not universal across the globe. It remains uncertain how long that internal unity within both bodies will last, especially if populists gain control of key member states.

Certainly, the Baltic states and Poland will remain focused on the Russian threat, but the attention span of policymakers and societies elsewhere is limited. As long as Russian military brutality and possible war crimes continue, European and North American publics will remain concerned. When the atrocities of Ukraine fade from the headlines and populations begin to focus on other issues, Western unity vis-à-vis Russia will no longer be guaranteed.