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Simon Reich

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EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES: HOW PUTIN REJUVENATED NATO AND “THE WEST” BY GIVING BOTH A COMMON PURPOSE

Simon Reich

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Prior to his appointment as Director of the CIA, William Burns wrote a short piece in which he laid out America's choices when it came to the Biden administration's foreign policy. He characterised three options: restoration, retrenchment or reinvention. Restoration entailed trying to buttress the major foundations of the multilateral Liberal international order, with the United States in a familiar role: the unquestioned “first among equals” as the leader of the “free world.” Retrenchment entailed America's strategic military withdrawal along the lines first mooted by Barack Obama and then emphatically endorsed and pursued by Donald Trump. Burns, however, prescribed reinvention: America should completely rethink its strategic principles, priorities and forms of engagement in a rapidly evolving global environment¹.

American choices and European responses

In the first year of his presidency, the Biden administration, in contrast to Burns' suggestion, chose a combination of restoration and retrenchment. In practice, this meant an awkward coupling of a reassertion of American global leadership and a recommitment to global institutions and treaties (such as the WHO and COP 21) with a chaotic American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and a signalling that it was far more interested in the Indo-Pacific and China than Europe and Russia.

These choices had major repercussions for Europe. Many Europeans may have been more relieved than enthralled by Biden's election. Trump's presidency had presented unprecedented challenges, and Biden offered the prospect of relief from major European states being depicted as rivals and free riders. So, they initially welcomed America's return to multilateralism. Nonetheless, both the EU's leadership and those of individual member states worried that their interests would be ignored. Their short-term concerns focused on whether the new administration would treat

both the European members of NATO and the EU itself with greater respect, as partners and not subordinates in promoting human rights, free trade and security. The longer-term consideration was whether the Biden administration would simply be an interregnum before the return of Donald Trump or one of his protégés. They therefore were (and today remain) concerned about the reliability of the United States as an ally².

Much of their shorter-term apprehension was justified prior to the outbreak of the Ukraine War. The summits to promote democracy, as part of what Biden characterised as a global conflict between democracy and autocracy, for example, were rhetorically supported by allies. But they resulted in few concrete initiatives. There has been no discernible progress on re-establishing a nuclear agreement with Iran, the unilateral American withdrawal from Afghanistan proved to be an operational nightmare for NATO's European members, and there was initially some very public transatlantic squabbling over the future of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Then the announcement of the creation of Aukus (the nuclear submarine agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US), and the indelicate notification of the cancellation of the submarine contract with France only two-hours before that announcement, riled French officials. They very publicly expressed their anger. Foreign Minister Le Drian described it as "a stab in the back." EU Commissioner Thierry Breton (another Frenchman) suggested that trust in the US was eroding and "something is broken in our transatlantic relations... Trust is not a given. And after the latest events, there is, I should say, a strong perception that trust between the EU and United States has been eroded."³ Gérard Araud, who served as French ambassador to the United States between 2014 and 2019, added that "You don't do that to an ally," that French officials should "never underestimate the incompetence of the U.S. administration" and, most tellingly and undiplomatically perhaps, "You know, Obama didn't care about Europe. Trump was hostile to Europe. And here you have Biden. And Biden, to be frank so far, is a big disappointment all over Europe.... there is no European policy. The administration has no European policy because its strategy is so focused on China."⁴ To make matters worse, the Aukus announcement coincided with the EU's own announcement of its Indo-Pacific strategy, diminishing the latter's fanfare⁵.

Together these developments helped strengthen one longstanding European fear: that it was being marginalised in the Indo-Pacific, the world's most economically dynamic region, despite French assertions that it is a Pacific power because of its overseas territories there. American behaviour, they believed, was consistent with the US' preference that there be a division of labour—with an American security focus on the Indo-Pacific and a European one eastward towards Russia. Europeans, led by France, disagreed. They want a major role in the Indo-Pacific as well. A subsequent

belated diplomatic flurry by the US, principally the much-touted establishment of an EU-US dialogue on the Indo-Pacific, was a seeming balm to reassure Europeans worried about being ignored in the region. But that appeared to do little to calm the concerns about Europe's leadership.

One effect of all these areas of tension and missteps was to enhance an increasingly jaundiced European view of a prospective return to US global leadership⁶. Their concerns about whether the Americans were trustworthy, concerns that had carried over from the Trump administration's policies, spread beyond security to other policy domains. These included trade (where the Biden administration was slow to lift Trump-era tariffs) and the flow of people across the Atlantic (where COVID restrictions on European travellers remained in place even after reciprocal constraints had been rescinded by EU member states).

A second predictable effect was to amplify calls in Brussels and Paris for greater European strategic autonomy, an initiative that would potentially undermine US efforts at re-establishing its global leadership⁷. By the opening months of 2022, that concern was exacerbated by questioning European reactions to American intelligence estimates about a military build-up on Ukraine's border. Even American warnings of an impending Russian invasion was not enough to generate an immediate consensus among Europe's NATO members about a collective response⁸. Newly-minted German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz's refusal to commit to a suspension of the opening of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline should Russia invade, even when standing next to Joe Biden at a White House press conference, epitomised the underlying tension between the United States and many of its major European NATO partners⁹. Conversely, American frustration at what they considered the usual European incapacity to unite predictably grew.

But then came the Ukraine war. It changed some things, but not all things, in the transatlantic relationship.

The Ukraine war—and its major consequences

Understood from this perspective, Vladimir Putin's invasion shocked European complacency about the prospects for a large-scale war in Europe. Indeed, Julia Ioffe described it as "Europe's 9/11 moment."¹⁰ There has subsequently been the inevitable speculation about whether the war signifies a fundamental change in the global system, such as towards US bipolarity with China or a multipolarity that includes Russia and the EU. Plenty of academics, commentators and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic have suggested that it is a watershed or what the Germans have labelled a *Zeitenwende* (a turning point where everything will change,

irreparably), and some have drawn parallels with a prior epoch by labelling it “Cold War 2.0.”¹¹ Others, like former US ambassador to NATO Ivo H. Daalder, have invoked the same logic, calling for a return to the familiar strategy of Containment to quell Russian revanchism¹².

That kind of speculation and prescription is understandable. It achieves its goal of attracting widespread attention. But it may be premature. There are, however, at least four consequences that are reasonably evident, even at this early stage of the war. The first is that Putin has single-handedly revived the concept of “the West.” Long since decried as vacuous in the face of transatlantic disagreements and intra-European fissures, many (particularly Asian) observers had proclaimed its demise—both as a meaningful collective concept and as a collective political and economic powerhouse¹³. But the evident shared declaration of purpose and unity of action, albeit after a hesitant start, suggests that the notion of the West retains some utility. In that vein, so does NATO. An organisation whose mission was mocked by Donald Trump as “obsolete” and which was described by Emmanuel Macron as “brain-dead” has now been invigorated, finding a renewed objective—to defend democracy and European sovereignty. The accelerated recommitment of its members to spend the requisite 2% of GDP on defence budgets faces a series of domestic budgetary and operational complications. But the war has nevertheless given fresh impetus to an organisation feared moribund, with Finland and Sweden now contemplating joining as part of an expanded membership. Furthermore, the West’s operational resuscitation has surely given China’s leadership pause for thought as it contemplates its future strategy in dealing with a transatlantic alliance composed of its two largest trading partners—partners that seemed so divided on the fundamentals until March of 2022.

Of course, these observations must be qualified with a question about how long a consensus will hold. Viktor Orban’s comments in his recent electoral victory speech (in which he decried some member states and the EU’s leadership as “opponents”) is the first sign that there may be some disagreement among Europeans moving forward. The same is possibly true of the disagreement between Macron and Biden about whether Russian behaviour in Ukraine constitutes a “genocide”—should the idea of an international war crimes trial come to fruition. Clearly, any disunity among EU members could test American patience with its European partners and disrupt efforts at sustaining a transatlantic accord. But at the current time, NATO’s consensus regarding sanctions makes Putin’s initial effort to drive a wedge between the US and Europe appear self-defeating.

As a corollary to that first consequence, a second is that Putin has inadvertently done much to rehabilitate Biden’s efforts to restore the United States’ image as the “leader of the free world.” Some trust in Biden has

been restored. European doubts about Biden's possible successor remain, but have been muted by his administration's willingness to provide over \$3 billion in military funding to Ukraine by early April (in comparison to the EU's EURO 500 military support by that time). To this should be added Biden's successful efforts, not to be overstated, in helping the EU to establish a consensus about both economic sanctions and the fate of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Certainly, enough loopholes remain in the sanction regime to mitigate their effects on the Russian economy because of Europe's oil and gas purchases. But it would be churlish not to acknowledge Biden's personal success in diplomatically coalescing Europe's leaders towards a position that has, paradoxically, made those leaders themselves look stronger because of their public unity.

The third consequence is that many of the residual questions about German militarisation, if not wholeheartedly addressed, seem to have disappeared from the public agenda. During the Cold War, while it was still divided, François Mauriac famously suggested that "I love Germany so much I'm glad there are two of them."¹⁴ And as Andrei Markovits and I wrote over two decades ago, the Cold War's conclusion did not resolve the moral and political dilemma other states (and the Germans themselves) faced about the prospect of German rearmament¹⁵. It was, of course, largely the Americans who aggressively tried to get the reluctant Germans to spend more on defence. But their efforts to cajole the Germans into spending greater sums—stretching from George W. Bush to Trump—had largely failed. In 2017, then German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel summed up his country's position in suggesting that "... two percent would mean military expenses of some 70 billion euros. I do not know any German politician who would claim that is reachable nor desirable" ... "The U.S. will realise it is better to talk about better spending instead of more spending"¹⁶ Even though Germany's projected defence budget increase in 2021 by 3.2%, to €53 billion, it still only raised spending to 1.57% of GDP, nowhere near the 2% expenditure required of NATO nations. As a result, according to Global Firepower, in 2021 the German military capacity only ranked 15th (below countries such as Egypt and Italy, and just above Indonesia)¹⁷. That pacifist posture has now been categorically rejected in Germany, with no complaints (and some wholehearted encouragement) from Germany's European neighbours. To put that last point in some perspective, there is no time in the last seventy years where support among its neighbours of such a significant increase in Germany's military budget was conceivable.

Finally, the Ukraine war has put European efforts to pursue strategic autonomy in the security realm in some perspective. Emmanuel Macron's vision that the EU develop an independent, integrated EU Rapid Deployment force totalling 5,000 troops is attractive to many in Brussels¹⁸. But it took an estimated Ukrainian military of 500,000 personnel, a hundred

times larger than the proposed EU force, to even confront—and only partially repel—the invading Russian force of over 190,000¹⁹. The proposed small EU force might be capable of addressing instability and insurrections on its periphery in South East Europe and North Africa. But it has no significant role to play in the geopolitics of great power competition. Yet, as my current project with Richard Higgott suggests, all is not lost when it comes to the pursuit of European strategic autonomy: there are other valuable policy domains where it is feasible, adding to the security and prosperity of Europeans²⁰.

Concluding thoughts—from the American perspective

The war is a human tragedy of massive proportions. From a strictly American perspective, however, this event has some redeeming features. First, it has awoken many in Europe from their unwarranted belief that the continent is immune from the vagaries of great power politics. With a few notable exceptions, it has reminded many of the more reticent among them that their responsibilities extend beyond Europe's promotion of itself as a normative or civilian power when it comes to sustaining the so-called Liberal international order. By necessity, those responsibilities include a militarised commitment – primarily to NATO and the European theatre, and nominally (if required) to the US in the Indo-Pacific.

Second, for the United States, America and European collaboration regarding Russia largely serves as a prelude to the larger question about whether they can reach any consensus about how to deal with China. To date, European leaders have hedged between China and the US on several issues including climate change and trade, albeit in large part because of the Trump administration's overt hostility towards them. But there remain grounds for concern, even from the Biden administration's perspective: the evidence suggests that it will have a difficult time reaching a policy consensus with Europe about both the EU's Green New Deal or its linkage between trade and human rights. Furthermore, even if some accord is reached, it will be difficult to sustain if the 2022 US Congressional elections or the 2024 presidential election results in Republican victories. Thus, the big challenge that looms for both sides of the Atlantic is whether they can present a unified Western front to China over a range of issues, or if they are susceptible to a long-term Chinese 'divide-and-rule' strategy.

Third, perhaps temporarily, for American's the war has reminded the EU's leadership and NATO's European membership of—hesitatingly invoking Madeleine Albright's famous term—"the indispensability of American power."²¹ European ambivalence towards the United States is understandable. The transatlantic relationship comes with a lot of baggage—about the meaning and functioning of democracy, the character

of capitalism, how pragmatic states should be when it comes to addressing concerns about human rights, and the prevailing question of whether the whims of the American electorate can be relied upon as the basis for Europe's foreign policies. Yet, evidently, no other country could or would have stepped in so readily to bolster Europe's defences and, at least at this point, so effectively. And no other country outside of Europe would have been so quick to offer refuge to 100,000 fleeing Ukrainians. That transatlantic relationship, Americans believe Europe has been reminded, therefore comes with benefits as well as costs. The abiding question concerns how much Europe's leaders will be willing to compromise in seeking a united position in the remainder of Biden's term of office.

Speculation about the outcome of the war abounds. Mine is that it will become a frozen conflict. Russia will control the Donbas and a land bridge to Crimea, although Ukrainian insurrection force will continue to operate in the east and Russian saboteurs, whether paramilitaries or official forces, will operate in the West. If Ukraine is divided, without a negotiated truce or peace agreement, it will likely fall upon the United States and the EU to continue to subsidize the free areas of Ukraine. It is only then, once the immediate crisis has passed, that we will be better able to judge the durability and depth of the newfound unity of the Western alliance.

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