

Russia's War in Ukraine: a Watershed for Europe

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marks a watershed. First, it signifies the return in Europe of large-scale interstate war, aimed at territorial expansion. Second, it indicates a radical shift in Russia's strategy, from destabilising Ukraine through relatively limited means to massive military coercion. Third, it seals the end of the post-Cold War security order, whose deep crisis made it ineffective to prevent the conflict. Fourth, the war reinforced the transatlantic front, thus aggravating Russia's security concerns. The war cannot be explained as the result of an escalation of tensions with the West, as there is too much of a disconnect and disproportionality between Moscow's voiced security concerns and its war objectives. It is vital to understand domestic factors: the Kremlin's perception of the 'loss' of Ukraine, in a blend of geopolitical and identity-based thinking, and the gradual escalation of its Ukraine strategy, because of consecutively failing scenarios.

Keywords: Ukraine; War; Russia; West; Security; Identity.

Resumo

A Guerra da Rússia na Ucrânia: um Ponto de Viragem para a Europa

A invasão da Ucrânia pela Rússia, em fevereiro de 2022, marca um ponto de viragem. Primeiro, significa o regresso da guerra inter-estatal em grande escala à Europa, visando expansão territorial. Em segundo lugar, indica uma mudança radical na estratégia da Rússia, da desestabilização da Ucrânia por meios relativamente limitados para a coerção militar massiva. Terceiro, sela o fim da ordem de segurança pós-Guerra Fria, cuja profunda crise a tornou ineficaz na prevenção do conflito. Quarto, a guerra reforçou a frente transatlântica, agravando assim as preocupações de segurança da Rússia. A guerra não pode ser explicada como resultado de uma escalada de tensões com o Ocidente, pois há enorme desconexão e desproporcionalidade entre as preocupações de segurança manifestadas por Moscovo e os seus objetivos. É essencial, assim, entender os fatores domésticos: a perceção do Kremlin sobre a "perda" da Ucrânia, numa mistura de pensamento geopolítico e identitário, e a escalada gradual da sua estratégia na Ucrânia, face a cenários consecutivamente falhados.

Palavras-Chave: Ucrânia; Guerra; Rússia; Ocidente; Segurança; Identidade.

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Introduction

On 24 February 2022 we woke up in a new world. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, on three different fronts, came as a surprise to many, including most Russian analysts, even those close to the Kremlin.¹ It was clear from the onset that Russia's war announced a new era in international relations. This was the case for at least four different reasons. First, the war is the biggest war of its kind in Europe since World War II. It is an interstate war, whereby the largest country in Europe, Russia, attacked the second largest, Ukraine. By all standards, it was a clear violation of international law, an 'act of aggression' under article 2(4) of the UN Charter and a violation of the European border regime. The use of massive force with the objective of territorial expansion is a fundamental new fact for Europe's security order, or rather, it is the return of an old fact, one that triggered two world wars in the 20th century and that therefore became a core principle of that security order. Second, the invasion indicated that Russia's strategy towards Ukraine had fundamentally changed, from a policy of destabilising Ukraine and keeping a foot in the door – between 2014 and the start of the 2022 invasion – to a policy of violent and large-scale territorial expansion, immersed in a rhetoric that simply denied Ukraine's right to exist. Third, this war sealed the end of the post-Cold War security order. The latter had been an ailing patient for many years, with its core pillars and principles steadily crumbling – as is described in more detail below. This means there is no common ground left, no shared normative framework, to renegotiate this security order. It has been buried and relations between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community are probably doomed to be based on confrontation, deterrence and distrust for a long time to come. Finally, the war has triggered the return of a united transatlantic front, not so long after Donald Trump called NATO 'obsolete' and Emmanuel Macron declared the alliance 'braindead'. Countries on both sides of the Atlantic have been united in imposing far-reaching sanctions on Russia, but also in defining the current war as a regional conflict, of which NATO 'is not part' (Stoltenberg 2022). For the EU, the invasion offers an opportunity to reinforce its security and defence policy and to raise its profile – even if this will have to happen in 'cooperation' with a revitalised NATO.

Despite this clear rupture with the past, many uncertainties and unclarity remain, not least related to why Russia decided to start this war, what the link is with the European security order and how it may affect the international order. It is on these topics that this article seeks to focus, trying to get a better understanding of moti-

1 See for example Trenin, stating less than one month before the invasion that a use of force scenario is 'unlikely': 'It's fraught with many negative consequences, and great human and financial losses.' (Trenin 2022)

vements, developments and implications of the war, but acknowledging at the same time that there are few final answers. Each analysis amidst unfolding events is doomed to have a degree of speculation. The next section seeks to understand Russia's motives for the invasion. It will be argued that the war cannot be understood without grasping internal Russian dynamics and that it is not simply an escalation of tensions with the West. The article then continues to assess the significance of the decaying post-Cold War security order for the current conflict. It concludes by reflecting on the impact the war may have on Russia's international position and security concerns.

Why Did Russia Invade Ukraine?

War has been raging in Eastern Ukraine since 2014 and made over an estimated 14,000 casualties in eight years. The Minsk II agreement failed to bring peace, plagued by implementation problems on both sides. The conflict lacked a final settlement and cemented a sort of permanent frontline, with frequent ceasefire violations. The invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was in that sense not an entirely new war, but it was clearly a new stage of a fundamentally new significance. First of all, different from the 2014-2022 war in the Donbas, Russia no longer pretended not to be an involved party. On the contrary, it chose to use massive force, attacking Ukraine on three different fronts, clearly targeting control over the entire territory and aiming to topple the regime. Also, the scale of the war and its brutality were obviously substantially different, including the widescale, indiscriminate shelling of civilian targets.

The invasion came after a year of escalating rhetoric from the Kremlin about Russia's 'red lines', reflecting the security concerns it had voiced many times, even before Putin came to power. In his State-of-the-nation speech of 21 April 2021, Putin spoke about red lines without specifying where exactly they were drawn: 'We really do not want to burn bridges. But if someone mistakes our good intentions for indifference or weakness and intends to burn or even blow up these bridges, they must know that Russia's response will be asymmetrical, swift and tough. Those behind provocations that threaten the core interests of our security will regret what they have done in a way they have not regretted anything for a long time. ... I hope that no one will think about crossing the "red line" with regard to Russia. We ourselves will determine in each specific case where it will be drawn.' (Putin 2021a). Only later, in December 2021, he translated the red lines into three unconditional demands: no further expansion of NATO to post-Soviet states, no deployment of offensive weapons in the proximity of Russia and the withdrawal of NATO military infrastructure from member states that joined after 1997. It was crystal

clear that these demands were unrealistic and were never expected to lead to full concessions by Washington.

The question that looms large for all analysts is what the link is between Moscow's demands – embedded in a harshening rhetoric – and the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. There are good reasons to assume that the carefully built up rhetoric, resulting in unconditional and unrealistic demands, was primarily a distraction and a pretext for the massive deployment of force. One reason is that there is a complete disconnect and disproportionality between the unconditional demands and the war Russia is fighting in Ukraine. This is in particular the case for the central demand to halt NATO expansion. The promise of NATO accession was made to Kyiv in 2008, that is not less than fourteen years before the invasion. Nor was accession imminent: no one expected that Ukraine would effectively be admitted to the alliance in the short or the mid-term. Moreover, leading Russian foreign policy analyst, Dmitri Trenin, argued briefly before the war that NATO membership of Ukraine would not pose a major strategic threat to Russia as it does not disrupt the deterrence balance:

'No degree of NATO expansion, including to incorporate Ukraine, will threaten the military balance and deterrence stability. ... Therefore, in terms of military security, it's correct to say I don't see NATO expansion as such a terrible threat. But there is another factor: a country that becomes a NATO member undergoes profound reformatting, which touches upon all walks of life. The country transforms politically and ideologically. While Ukraine is outside of NATO, it's still possible that the entire country or some part of it may decide that the Slavic identity, the "Russian world," and other things matter, and this may lead to a normalization of relations with Russia, and even closer relations with it. At least, from Moscow's vantage point, such a possibility remains. But if a country joins NATO, that's it: that ship has sailed. In this sense, yes, there is a threat but not a military one; rather, it's geopolitical and geocultural.' (Trenin 2022)

Starting a war of this scale, at the cost of so many lives, cannot be justified on the basis of such non-imminent and non-vital security concerns. Nor can it be argued that a large-scale war and territorial control over Ukraine were the only option for Russia. Moreover, the war itself created the biggest European security crisis since the Second World War, and contrary to the unlikely possibility of Ukraine joining NATO, it was a real, unfolding crisis rather than a potential threat. As will be argued below, the invasion further increased the security problems Russia claimed to tackle: Moscow is now confronted with a stronger and further expanding NATO and a further militarisation of Russia's western borders. There is also a disconnect in terms of argumentation. In the days leading up to the invasion, for example, the speech of Putin of 21 February put the emphasis mainly on the historical (selective) arguments claiming that Ukraine was an artificial creation and had no right to exist

(Putin 2022a). The declared objectives were the denazification and demilitarisation of Ukraine, covered in a language of absurdly reversed threat. The link to Putin's three unconditional demands to the West of December 2021 remained very vague. Interestingly, the invasion also made the issue shift from a security issue between Russia and the US – negotiated over Ukraine's head – to a direct issue between Russia and Ukraine, whereby the US and NATO positioned themselves as an external party.

It would be erroneous to claim that the invasion of Ukraine was simply the result of an escalation over Russian security concerns unmet by the West. Differently from what many analysts expected, the invasion was not a spillover from the war that had raged in the Donbas since 2014, nor was it the result of an escalation with the West. On the contrary, it was a deliberate, unprovoked invasion, clearly driven by its own motives. However, this does not mean that the steady erosion of the post-Cold War security order has not facilitated the invasion, as will be argued below.

What then were Russia's motives for the invasion? A considerable part of the analysis of Moscow's reasons for starting a full-scale war may have focused too exclusively on abstract images of spheres of influence, balances of power and clashing great power interests (Mearsheimer 2014 and 2022). These broad schemes fail to explain the disconnect mentioned between Russia's security demands to the West and the type of war it launched against Ukraine. Most crucially, they fail to take domestic factors into account. Three need to be mentioned. First, the reading of the 2014 Ukraine crisis in Russia. While for the West, this was a serious security crisis, for Russia the impact went way further; it was experienced as an 'existential crisis' (Youngs 2017, p. 14). As Igor Torbakov states: 'The Ukraine conflict has undoubtedly been pivotal. It threw into question Russia's self-understanding as a great European power and smashed to smithereens the two main pillars of the Kremlin's long-term strategy: maintaining good working relations with Europe, especially with Germany and France, and promoting the 'Eurasian integration' of former Soviet lands.' (Torbakov 2021).

One reason for this existential crisis had to do with the way Russia's leadership read the Euromaidan revolt and the change of regime in Kyiv in a blend of geopolitical and identity-based interpretations. The geopolitical reading was one of 'losing' Ukraine to the West and the catastrophic impact this had on Russia's strategic position. This is very much reflecting the famous claim of Brzezinski in *The Grand Chessboard*: 'Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state ...' (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 46). Keeping control of Ukraine was understood as crucial for Russia's future as great power. While this may sound like a full-blooded geopolitical argument, it is particular for Russia that this is entangled with the complex relation the country has with its national identity.

Russia has in its history developed as empire, before it has developed as a nation. As an empire it has grown dramatically, absorbed new territories and people, without a clear delineation between the motherland and colonised areas (Lieven 2002). Russia has therefore struggled to embrace a clear-cut national identity, distinct from its identity as empire. To put it differently, post-communist Russia has continued to struggle with its imperial past and to live and think within the current borders of the Russian Federation. This produced strong imaginaries of 'national loneliness' and Russia as 'fortress or solitude' (Akopov 2020, pp. 296 and 305). The collapse of the USSR produced 'fraternalist narratives concerning brotherly links and paternalistic relationships to the Russian leaders, who continue to consider former Soviet states, especially Ukraine and Belarus, as 'naturally' belonging to Russia's cultural and political sphere of influence' (Akopov 2020, pp. 295-296). A similar idea was defended by Solzhenitsyn, who pleaded in the early 1990s to maintain the Slavic core of the Soviet Union, with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine (Robinson 2020). As a result, views continued to simmer of Ukraine as Russian land or Ukrainians and Russians as 'one people', an argument frequently repeated by Putin in the year preceding the invasion (see inter alia Putin 2021b and 2022a). While these debates have never entirely faded, they got a new boost with the 2014 Ukraine crisis, leading to widespread debates on Russia's identity (Torbakov 2019). For some, like then Putin's personal advisor on Ukraine, Vladislav Surkov, the Ukraine crisis implied 'the end of Russia's epic journey to the West' and a return to 'one hundred (two hundred? three hundred?) years of geopolitical solitude' (Surkov 2018). Others returned to Tsymbursky's concept of an insular Russia (see for example Mezhujev 2017), that became 'vogue geopolitical thinking' (Torbakov 2021). With the idea of 'island Russia', Tsymbursky casts post-communist Russia as a 'lonely great power', representing an autonomous civilisation of its own, which had to maintain control over its 'Great Periphery' – though he opposed territorial expansion (Torbakov 2021). On this basis Mezhujev developed a strategy of 'civilisational realism' where he envisages a world of civilisational blocs and pleads for a 'demilitarized zone of buffer states separating Russia from the Euro-Atlantic region, providing mutual security guarantees and ensuring the territorial integrity of these states and the right of their ethnic and sub-ethnic groups to cultural and linguistic identity' (Mezhujev 2018). Well beyond the ideas of Tsymbursky, Akopov (2020, p. 295) notes a revival of the concepts of 'greater' and 'historical' Russia, resulting in expansionist and irridentist positions. Those varied from more limited scenarios based on the 'Russian world' idea, to radical scenarios in line with the imperialist thinking of Dugin.

A second important domestic factor was the Kremlin's frustration with the stalemate over Eastern Ukraine and Putin's ambition to find a permanent solution for the conflict. With the establishment of the People's Republic of Donetsk and

Luhansk, Russia had managed to keep a foot in the door in Ukraine. It exerted what can be called 'negative compulsory power', aimed at 'preventing effective control by and to the advantage of the West', making Ukraine a liability for its Western partners rather than a benefit (Casier 2018, p. 103). Yet, the weak implementation of the Minsk II agreement led to a stalemate and the strategy of preventing control and destabilising Ukraine from within had only limited success. Moscow's Donbas policy lacked coherence and its final goals remained unclear. Putin tried to remedy this by centralising the Ukraine policy under the leadership of Dmitry Kozak (Watling & Reynolds 2022, pp. 6-7).

This takes us to a third domestic factor. Russia's renewed Ukraine policy under Kozak tried out different actions, following a strategy of escalation, whereby the strategy was adapted when it failed. Consecutive failures thus led to a radicalisation of scenarios. Though we have no detailed insight into these escalating strategies, it may have looked something like this (Watling & Reynolds 2022, p. 17). Initially, Russia sought to put pressure on Ukraine, through economic pressure and by keeping a foot in the door through the decentralisation of power and local self-governance for Donetsk and Luhansk – inscribed in the Minsk II agreement, but never implemented. Through troop mobilisation and eventually the recognition of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, it sought to put pressure on the West. Next, it sought to overthrow the government in Kyiv through covert actions. Finally, this led Russia to the most radical scenario of military invasion and occupation of Ukraine. A scenario implying the use of military force had become more 'acceptable' over time, driven among others by the quick military success of Azerbaijan in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020. The choice of a military scenario based on the massive use of force against Ukraine indicates a drastic shift in Russia's strategy. Before the 2022 invasion, Moscow sought to use minimal means in order to resort maximal effects, often acting by surprise and by stealth. In this way, it also took control of Crimea through 'deniable intervention' (Allison 2014), initially ignoring the involvement of Russian troops and annexing a big chunk of territory with minimal effort. Similarly, it sought to achieve foreign policy success by making use of a wide spectrum of limited means, from meddling in elections to cyber-attacks. The contrast can hardly be bigger: with the invasion of Ukraine, Russia opted for the massive use of military force, aiming at large-scale territorial expansion. Ironically, the massive losses of troops and material Russia incurred in the first months of the war and massive sanctions imposed on the country, underline exactly the discrepancy between these maximal means and the relatively limited results at the time of writing.

This escalation of scenarios may explain how a discourse, denying Ukraine the right to exist as a sovereign entity, gets prominence at the highest political level in 2021 and early 2022. In Summer 2021, Putin publishes a lengthy article on the topic

(Putin 2021b). Closer to the invasion, this discourse further radicalises and appears in statements of both Putin (Putin 2022a) and Foreign Minister Lavrov (Lavrov 2022). It goes without saying that their argumentation is based on a distorted and selective reading of history and reflect a strong imperialist mindset.

In all likelihood, the original goal of the February 2022 invasion was the dissolution of the Ukrainian state. Yet, it is also likely that the tunnel vision that the Kremlin developed about Ukraine, is part of the explanation of why the war efforts faltered during the first stage of the war, when Russia was unsuccessfully trying to get control of Kyiv. Many reasons have been mentioned for Russia's failed northern offensive and lack of military success in general, from low morale among the military, to bad intelligence, logistics problems, ineffective tactics and inefficient coordination between its forces. But it is equally assumed that the Russian leadership has vastly underestimated Ukraine's unity, capacity and will to resist. Drawing on Taras Kuzio, who claims that 'Russian nationalist stereotypes and myths about Ukraine and Ukrainians had little basis in reality' (Kuzio 2019, p. 304), it may be argued that the Kremlin was blinded by the myths it created about Ukraine by its own doing. To put it differently, the consistently repeated ideas about Ukraine as 'Russian lands', and Russians and Ukrainians as 'one people' (see Putin 2021b) or about Ukraine as 'an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space', a country 'entirely created by ... Communist Russia' (Putin 2022a) may have led to unrealistic expectations about a quick destabilisation of the country, a swift fall of the regime, massive defection among the military, and so on. Russian key decision-makers may have understood identity as something immutable and grounded in the common past of Ukraine and Russia. By doing so, they completely underestimated not only how Ukraine's common identity has developed over time, and not least how it was given a boost by Russia itself, when it annexed Crimea and fuelled the 2014 Donbas war. To put it bluntly, Russia's previous, aggressive policies vis-à-vis Ukraine may have turned it into the biggest unifier of Ukraine. This seems to be supported by data: whereas 17% of the Ukrainian population identified as Russian in the 2001 census, only 6% did so in 2017 in research carried out by the Razumkov centre (Kuzio 2019, p. 299).

Why the Invasion Signifies the End of the post-Cold War Security Order in Europe

As argued above, the invasion of Ukraine was not simply an escalation of tensions with the West, but a conscious attempt at dissolving the Ukrainian state and expanding Russia's territory, in the biggest war in Europe since 1945. This act dealt a death blow to the European security order that was created mainly at the end of

the Cold War, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Already before the invasion, the post-Cold War security order was already in a deep, systemic crisis, with all four of the pillars on which it rested crumbling. The war, however, forms a watershed, as it wiped out the last chance at renegotiating Europe's security order on the basis of common principles. Only confrontation, deterrence and distrust now drive security relations between Russia and the West.

The first pillar of the post-Cold War security order was formed by the normative framework underlying the order, by the principles that were laid down in several agreements, such as the 'Charter of Paris for a new Europe' of 1990. They created a framework of mutual expectations as to how Russia, the post-Soviet states and Western states would behave. At the heart of the Paris Charter were the principle of the indivisibility of security and a Europe without dividing lines, calling for a 'Europe whole and free' (Charter of Paris 1990, pp. 5-6). Signatories promised 'to refrain from the threat or use of force' but also vowed to respect 'the freedom of states to choose their own security arrangements' (Charter of Paris 1990, pp. 6 and 8). It is clear we have moved already a long time ago away from this Europe without dividing lines. Binary security structures have arisen in Europe and slid into confrontation. NATO enlarged eastwards and met with increasingly assertive opposition from Russia, who regarded the expansion as a redistribution of spheres of influence (Putin 2017).

The second, related pillar was the ambition to create a collective security system for wider Europe. Institutionally, this role was to be played by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Yet, the organisation did not manage to play that role, operating in the shadow of NATO and constrained by consensus decision-making (Freire and Simão, 2018, pp. 160 and 165). Russia itself had an ambiguous attitude vis-à-vis the organisation. The Ukraine crisis of 2014, whereby the OSCE was first humiliated and then unable to play a significant role, demonstrated the absence of any effective collective security mechanism in Europe, that could have helped to control and de-escalate a crisis.

A third pillar was formed by the arms control agreements signed predominantly in the transition years between the communist and post-communist era. Four treaties were key to this arms control regime, of which only one is standing today. The Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) dates back to 1972 and aimed to prevent the development of a missile defence system, which could disrupt the strategic balance between the two main superpowers. The United States withdrew from the ABM treaty in 2002, allowing the country to deploy its anti-missile shield. The Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF 1987) banned the possession and production of missiles with a range of 500 to 5500 km. Alleging Russian violations, the Trump administration announced its intention to withdraw from the INF Treaty in February 2019 – followed by a similar Russian declaration shortly thereafter – and

effectively withdrawing in August 2019. The Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE, 1990) set equal limits on conventional weapons among NATO and former Warsaw Pact member states. The treaty faced problems from an early stage on and the adapted CFE agreement of 1999 was not ratified by all parties. Russia announced the suspension of the treaty in 2007; the US came up with a similar statement in 2011. The Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START I treaty of 1991, renewed in 2010, known as the 'New START') set limits to strategic nuclear weapons of the US and Russia and provided a far-reaching inspection mechanism. It is the only treaty still standing. In 2021 the US and Russia agreed on an extension of the treaty till 2026.

The last pillar was formed by Europe's border regime. Given Europe's history, the principles on the inviolability of frontiers and the territorial integrity of states (laid down inter alia in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, 1.III and 1.IV) are crucial to the continent's security. They have been violated flagrantly by Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and brutally by its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Moscow has eagerly used the 'Kosovo precedent' to legitimise the annexation of Crimea, invoking the principle of self-determination. While most legal experts reject the validity of this argument, some recognised that 'Western states bear their share of responsibility for the fact that Russia can make at least a political argument for a right to self-determination of Crimea under international law, even if that argument does not hold a thorough legal analysis.' (Marxsen 2014, 389). It is clear that the 2022 invasion went way further than the take-over of Crimea and indicates the most blatant violation of the European border regime.

The significance of this cannot overrated, as the following examples illustrate. The crumbling of the post-Cold War security order means that the foundation of common normative principles for security in greater Europe has disappeared. With it vanished a set of trust- and confidence-building measures. Many of them were translated into specific measures that allowed for surveillance, either on the ground or through monitoring flights, as was the case for the Open Skies Treaty, discontinued today. Moreover, the now defunct CFE Treaty was exactly meant to avoid the possibility of a conventional *Blitzkrieg* in Europe (Kimball 2017). It prohibited, for example, the mobilisation of forces close to the border, something Russia did on a massive scale close to the Ukrainian border in 2021 and 2022. On 18 and 19 March 2022, Moscow claimed the first use in combat of two hypersonic *Kinzhal* missiles. These missiles are difficult to track by radar because of their speed and ability to change trajectory. They have been developed as a response to the US missile defence system, for which George W. Bush had withdrawn from the ABM Treaty in 2002. These examples demonstrate how instruments to avoid escalation and to build trust have disappeared with the erosion of the post-Cold War order. They do not demonstrate that this erosion *caused* the war in Ukraine,

but only that it facilitated Russia's invasion, as few prevention mechanisms or trust-building measures were left.

Russia's Security Concerns Revisited

At this point, it is impossible to predict how the war will affect international relations in the longer term. This will depend on the outcome of the war in the first place and the costs it will imply for Russia in the longer term. The chances of a protracted war and a new permanent frontline are a likely outcome. So will be an enduring confrontation with the West, with little or no common ground for negotiating a new security order for Europe. Also, black swans may impact the outcome: domestic developments in Russia, an internationalisation of the war, changes in the attitudes of third countries, etc.

Despite all these uncertainties, a couple of consequences stand out at the time of writing. Most importantly, the Putin regime got about everything at the international level it wanted to avoid – and this in a context where the gains from the war are most uncertain. First of all, Russia has suffered a tremendous loss of prestige and credibility. This holds in the first place for its status as great power. So far, its efficiency on the battleground has been underwhelming. The war effort has faltered and after one month of war Russia was forced to adapt its war objectives and to withdraw from northern Ukraine, reconcentrating its efforts on eastern and southern Ukraine. The loss of prestige is even bigger when it comes to its credibility in the normative field. For years the regime invoked International Law to defend its security concerns and to challenge the West for its double standards. This position had already suffered major damage as a result of the annexation of Crimea, but suffered a death blow with the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, a blatant violation of international law, triggering a probe into war crimes by the International Criminal Court from an early stage of the war. Russia's war has subverted the legitimacy of the security concerns it has expressed over NATO enlargement ever since the 1990s. Even if these concerns were reasonable, it is water under the bridge to discuss them now. Russia's territorial expansion and willingness to fight a large-scale, ruthless war, have now become Europe's biggest security problem and the country is now undeniably perceived as the major security threat by most European countries.

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine does not seem to solve any of Russia's security problems. It has only aggravated them. On its Western borders, Moscow finds itself confronted with a stronger and more militarised NATO, a united EU and a united transatlantic front. Euro-Atlantic states are willing to increase their defence efforts considerably. Of those, Germany's 'historic shift' has been the most significant for

Russia. Chancellor Scholz broke with German's policy not to send weapons to conflict areas and pledged to invest an additional 100 billion EUR in defence. The significance of this is enormous. It is a rupture with the policy of reconciliation between Germany and Russia, that dates back to the Ostpolitik of Willy Brandt in the early 1970s, and has been seen as a linchpin of any European security order.

Moscow is confronted with an extended set of far-reaching sanctions, that broke many taboos. Most importantly, the EU seized the initiative in the field of energy, vowing a reduction of gas imports from Russia with two thirds by the end of 2022, as well as putting the phasing out of oil imports on the table. In doing so, the EU reversed the dependency problem: it was not the supply dependence of European states on Russian energy that limited their policy options, but Russia's dependence on European demand and the huge income it generates that left Moscow in a weak position. At the time of writing, the EU has agreed six sanctions packages. This requires unanimity among member states, displaying a high degree of unity, despite some disagreements on an oil embargo. It would not be correct to say the EU has only now regained its unity vis-à-vis Russia. The EU continuously had sanctions on Russia since the annexation of Crimea, renovating them unanimously every six months. More than being divided over Russia, EU member states have been ambiguous vis-à-vis Russia. Despite uninterrupted EU sanctions since 2014, the trade volume between Russia and the EU largely normalised in 2017 after an initial drop (DG Trade 2018) and the import of natural gas from Russia exceeded 41.3% of EU natural gas imports in 2019 (European Commission 2021, p. 26). Business thus continued as usual, leading to an odd co-existence of conflict and cooperation. The goal of the new EU sanctions, however, has radically changed. They are no longer about sending signals to Russia, nor is it expected the sanctions will deter the Kremlin from fighting this war. This time the main goal, in the words of Commission President von der Leyen, is 'to cripple Putin's ability to finance his war machine' (von der Leyen 2022).

The invasion of Ukraine also created a window of opportunity for the EU to reinforce its security and defence policy. That the invasion happened under the Council's French presidency increased the chances for the EU to play the cards right. President Macron, a long-time proponent of stronger European defence cooperation, seized the opportunity to enhance the commitment of the member states in the Versailles declaration (2022) to bolster defence capabilities and to increase the EU's capacity to act autonomously in the field of security. Inevitably, this opportunity goes hand in hand with a revival of NATO. The alliance seems to have closed ranks and its reason of existence is hardly questioned. Despite their long neutral traditions, Sweden and Finland applied for accession to NATO in May 2022. In the case of Finland, this would bring a country into the alliance, sharing a border of 1340 km with Russia and capable of mobilising an army of 280,000 – which makes it a major

force in NATO. There is little doubt that, however much the EU grows its security potential, it will continue to operate in the shadow of NATO on this front. Moreover, if it ever were to come to negotiating security arrangements and nuclear arms control with Russia again, the key role will inevitably be for the US.

At a global level, the war has pushed Russia further into isolation. Yet, a lot will depend on the choice of some key players, in the first place China. Russia and China have a strategic partnership. The latter was confirmed in a Joint Statement, on 4 February 2022, just a few weeks before the start of the war (Joint Statement 2022). In the statement Moscow and Beijing 'reaffirm their strong mutual support for the protection of their core interests' and explicitly oppose the further enlargement of NATO. Yet, the spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry was quick to confirm, on the day of Russia's invasion, that 'that China-Russia relations are based on the foundation of non-alliance' (Hua Chunying 2022).

Despite taking over Russia's narrative about the 'special military operation' in Ukraine and about the West's responsibility, Beijing abstained in the UN Security Council resolution condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine. This seems illustrative of China's attitude of keeping a low profile over the conflict. Prior to the war, the country also had important trade relations with Kyiv. Ukraine acted as a hub in China's Belt and Road initiative. It is clear that China has little interest in protracted instability in the area. Nor does it have an interest in being seen siding with Russia in this conflict, thus running the risk of reputational damage and possibly sanctions. Beijing is thus walking a tightrope and the longer the conflict lasts, the bigger the pressure will be to take more distance from Moscow. Eventually, Russia and China are mainly united by a negative common link: their rejection of Western dominance in international affairs. Yet, they position themselves very differently in the international system. Russia has been a vocal and provocative contender of the current structures of international governance. It regards the current international system as an obstacle to its development and great power status. China, on the other hand, has benefited in many ways from the current international governance structures: it has risen spectacularly because of the relative openness of the global economic order, which was vital for its export-oriented economy. Beijing shares Russia's concern over Western dominance and unilateral actions. It is seeking a better representation, but has no interest in overhauling the international system abruptly. On the contrary, it follows a long-term, more prudent strategy. This is why Krickovic calls China a 'cautious riser' and Russia a 'desperate challenger' (Krickovic 2017). As a result, Beijing's support for Russia is neither unconditional nor unlimited. If China explicitly takes distance from Russia, the latter's isolation may become highly problematic and the Kremlin would see itself confronted with one more major strategic loss. If this happens, the Ukraine war would again prove to be a watershed, undermining an anti-Western coalition of some sort.

Similar arguments can be made about the possible debilitation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The latter will likely be severely weakened by the heavy sanctions imposed on Russia and Belarus, which inevitably have serious ramifications for other member states. Moreover, it is likely that several EAEU members have serious concerns about the invasion of Ukraine, but most of them have their hands tied. The president of Belarus, Lukashenka – who back in 2014 called the annexation of Crimea ‘a bad precedent’ (Lukashenko 2014) – had to buy Russia’s support in his crackdown of the protests of 2020-21. Armenia is dependent on Russian security guarantees, not least to control the ceasefire agreement that ended the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020. In the case of Kazakhstan, President Tokayev requested and got the assistance of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), including Russian soldiers, to suppress the domestic unrest in January 2022 and preserve Tokayev’s regime.

Conclusion

Despite many uncertainties, it is clear that Russia’s invasion and full-scale war in Ukraine constitutes a watershed. The war cannot simply be seen as the result of an escalation of tensions between Russia and the West. It would be erroneous to see the invasion as the only option left for Russia after its security concerns fell repeatedly on deaf ears in Washington. On the contrary, there is a striking disconnect and disproportionality between Russia concerns over NATO enlargement and its objectives in the current war, in particular that of territorial expansion. The disproportionality rests in its action to respond to potential long-term security threats by triggering nothing less than the biggest security crisis in Europe and endeavouring the most extended territorial expansion since the Second World War. The disconnect is even more obvious, as Russia sees many of its security concerns aggravated as a result of the invasion, finding itself confronted with a stronger and further expanding NATO. Also the Kremlin’s overstretched rhetoric underlines the discrepancy, seeking to combine a discourse on the strategic threat of NATO expansion with a discourse on the denazification of Ukraine detached from reality.

It would be reductionist to explain the war on the basis of power balances and spheres of influence. The decision to invade Ukraine cannot be understood without taking domestic factors and perceptions into account. The Russian leadership has struggled with what it perceived as the existential loss of Ukraine in 2014, a country it considered to be key to both its great power status and its (post-imperial) identity. Against this background, consecutive failures of different Ukraine strategies have likely radicalised the Kremlin’s approach to the point a full-scale invasion. This signifies a fundamental change of its strategy, whereby Russia no longer seeks to

punch above its weight by using minimal means to resort maximal effects, but has opted for a full-blown interstate war and the use of massive force aimed at the dissolution of Ukraine and its own territorial expansion.

The war seals the end of the post-Cold War security order, not least because of the brutal rupture with one of the most fundamental principles of that order, i.e. that borders cannot be changed by force. Yet, it may be argued that the war has been facilitated by the gradual decay of that same security order. In the new context, post 24 February 2022, there is no common ground left for renegotiating the broader European security order. A protracted period of confrontation and distrust may thus well be on the cards.

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