

George N. Tzogopoulos - 08 March 2023

## The War in Ukraine and Europe's Choices

### Introduction

On 24 February 2022, the international community held its breath. Following months of disagreements, American-Russian multifaceted negotiations collapsed, and Russia took the decision to launch a war against Ukraine. Real conflict returned to Europe's backyard at a moment when such a scenario had been considered almost unthinkable by most European politicians and opinion-makers. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron had insisted on the significance of a diplomatic solution by keeping channels of communication open with their Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin and endeavoring to mediate. The latter, however, opted for the use of military force in achieving political goals. One year after the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, reported military casualties total approximately 200,000,<sup>1</sup> while peace prospects seem rather grim.

Russia's war against Ukraine, 'a war of choice' as it is regularly referred to in Brussels,<sup>2</sup> marks the beginning of a new chapter in the history of international relations. The 'End of History' argument of Francis Fukuyama could questionably find resonance in an era where unilateralism no longer defines world politics, and Russia strives for a comeback, albeit brutal and violent. While the defense of Ukraine has become a priority for the West not only to protect the country and its people but also to prevent the advancement of Russia's military forces, relations between the EU and Russia have entered a phase of serious tensions. Tit-for-tat measures, such as sanctions, are causing uncertainty in the international system and render the rate of attrition a fundamental element throughout the process. Under extreme circumstances, the EU is striving to build resilience and safeguard its interests.

### NATO and the EU Strategic Autonomy

The EU responded to the war in Ukraine by coming closer to the USA, its crucial security guarantor. NATO's role has been subsequently strengthened. Most scholars agree that the decision of Russia to invade Ukraine re-energized the Alliance. In 2019, President

Macron had warned about a 'brain-dead' NATO<sup>3</sup> but the latter's awakening since 24th February 2022 is evident. The Alliance has condemned Russia's war against Ukraine in the strongest possible terms as a blatant violation of international law and an act of aggression that gravely undermines international security and stability. It is continuously standing with the people of Ukraine and its legitimate, democratically elected president, parliament and government. Its support is both political and military. Beyond political solidarity, NATO is part of the US-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group which has been instrumental in delivering the military capabilities the Ukrainians need. Contact group members are also helping train Ukrainian service members in the use of these capabilities. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg frequently takes part in meetings of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group.<sup>4</sup> High Representative Josep Borrell is also doing so.<sup>5</sup>

A significant part of the military materiel Ukraine needs belongs to individual countries and not NATO. Most Western military assistance has thus come in the form of bilateral arms transfers. The Alliance coordinates this effort – but without diminishing the security of its own member states. The objective is to ensure that the war does not escalate and spread beyond Ukraine, which would be even more devastating and dangerous. The enforcement of a no-fly zone, for instance, would bring NATO forces into direct conflict with Russia.<sup>6</sup> As far as the security of the allies itself is concerned, the activation of NATO's defense plans and deployment of thousands of extra troops from both sides of the Atlantic after 24 February 2022 has sent a clear signal to Moscow. Over 40,000 troops, along with significant air and naval assets, have been placed under direct NATO command in the eastern part of the Alliance. In addition, NATO rapidly established four new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia that complement the existing battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. The eight battlegroups extend all along NATO's eastern flank, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south.<sup>7</sup> Last but not least, the determination of Finland and Sweden to join NATO demonstrates the powerful and dynamic character of

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the Alliance as the most successful military organization in history.

Approximately four months after the beginning of the war, NATO updated its strategic concept and defined Russia as the ‘most significant and direct threat’ to allied security. The previous version had been adopted at the Lisbon summit in 2010. The 2022 Madrid summit sets out priorities, tasks and approaches for the next decade. In particular, it describes the new security environment, reaffirms the Alliance’s values, spells out its key purpose of ensuring collective defense for Allies, and identifies core tasks of deterrence and defense, crisis prevention and management. Further to this, the Madrid Declaration welcomes efforts of all Allies engaged in providing support to Ukraine and focuses on the commitment of the Alliance to assist them adequately, recognizing their specific situation. In tandem, NATO, jointly with Ukraine, are working on a strengthened package of support which could accelerate the delivery of non-lethal defense equipment, improve Ukraine’s cyber defenses and resilience, and help modernize its defense sector in its transition to strengthen long-term interoperability. In addition, the Madrid Declaration mentions that the Alliance would assist Ukraine and support efforts on its path towards post-war reconstruction and reforms in the long-term.<sup>8</sup>

In January 2023, the EU and NATO signed their third declaration after those of 2016 and 2018.<sup>9</sup> While the war in Ukraine intensifies this collaboration, it also questions the relevance of the European strategic autonomy concept in today’s world. The intent of most EU member states to increase their defense spending after the beginning of the invasion – Germany being a remarkable case – does not necessarily mean that Europe would be able or keen on acting as a protagonist in the international geopolitical arena, at least any time soon. In terms of collective defense, even if European allies do strengthen their activities, it will be likely that these additional efforts would primarily be channeled through NATO.<sup>10</sup> Whether a European pillar of NATO can be created, and whether this will complement the mission of the Alliance are questions which will be generating fruitful debate for years to come.<sup>11</sup>

From an American perspective, the European strategic autonomy concept could be provisionally useful. If EU member states build conventional capabilities and conduct management operations without heavy reliance on the US, the latter will be able to shift more forces to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the US is inter-

ested in maintaining its political influence over the EU as it counts on it in exercising foreign policy toward Russia and China. Although the EU does not envisage its future under American hegemony, its current position is rather weak because it is unable to respond to existential security threats alone. In strengthening its position, the EU needs to move the strategic concept forward for the long-term. Some political will was (again) expressed in the European Council’s Versailles Declaration of 11 March 2022, a few weeks after the war had started.<sup>13</sup> Also, many of the deliverables of the Strategic Compass with regard to strategic autonomy are expected to be realized in 2023. Examples encompass regular live exercises, the EU Space Defense Strategy and new financing solutions for joint procurement of EU strategic defense capabilities.<sup>14</sup> A stronger Europe requires a strong European defense and difficult political decisions.

## A Multifaceted Response

The beginning of the war in Ukraine has sparked a multifaceted European response. In a period of one year, the EU imposed ten rounds of sanctions against Russia. Sanctions are aimed, among other things, at the country’s banking sector, its National Central Bank, transportation, oil and coal and other raw materials. Although the efficiency of restrictive measures on weakening the Russian economy will be evaluated in the long-term, initial results are arguably encouraging. Moscow’s ability to continue the conflict has not been thwarted, for now. An October 2022 Brugel study shows, for example, that Russia’s current account improved dramatically in the first nine months of 2022. The surplus for January-September was approximately \$200 billion, roughly \$120 billion higher compared to the same period in 2021.<sup>15</sup> In the interim, high energy and food prices have pushed inflation to high rates in Europe. EU annual inflation was 10.4% in December 2022, while it had been 5.3% in December 2021. However, inflation in December 2022 was lower in comparison to November 2022 (10,1%).<sup>16</sup>

The shock of the invasion of Ukraine has pushed the EU to reconsider its energy policy. In so doing, it has taken unprecedented steps to reduce dependence on Russian energy resources. An ECFR report identifies 56 new energy deals that the EU and member states signed with third countries in 2022.<sup>17</sup> They managed to assemble a fairly broad portfolio of new supplies in order to reduce reliance on a single source. A sharp in-

crease in imports of liquified natural gas (LNG), particularly from the US, has been a safe, albeit expensive alternative. Between January and November 2022, European statistics show that Russia stood for less than a quarter of EU gas imports.<sup>18</sup> In 2021, the EU had imported more than 40% of its total gas consumption, 27% of oil imports and 46% of coal imports from Russia.<sup>19</sup> Within this framework, progress monitored in Germany is remarkable. By 1 January 2023, the country had already managed to eliminate its imports of Russian gas, oil and coal.<sup>20</sup>

At the political level, the conflict in Ukraine and subsequent economic repercussions generated internal tensions in some European countries or led to political changes. Tensions or changes, however, did not alter the dynamism of support offered to Ukraine. The unity government of Mario Draghi in Italy, for instance, collapsed in June 2022. The new right-wing government under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni preserved the same stance as the previous one in relation to the conflict in Ukraine. France, for its part, remained committed to the defense of Ukraine despite the inability of Emmanuel Macron's party to win the parliamentary majority in June amid gains by a new leftist coalition and the far right. Moreover, the new Swedish government formed after the national election of September 2022, followed the same path. In this spirit, it pledged to rush Archer artillery cannons to Ukraine in mid-February 2023.<sup>21</sup> Generally speaking, democratic reflexes have prevailed. Events such as the demonstration against the pro-Western government organized in Prague in October 2022,<sup>22</sup> have not had the dynamism to reverse pre-existing trends.

Additionally, the EU has responded to the outbreak of the war by hosting the majority of refugees who fled Ukraine. As of December 2022, 4.8 million people were registered for temporary protection. Brussels has removed many barriers refugees typically face by offering residency rights, work permits, and access to health care, schools, housing and banking services.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, this flexibility is not reflected in EU-Ukraine membership talks. The EU-Ukraine summit of February 2023 produced no specific results. While specific criteria apply, Ukrainian expectations are not met under particularly difficult conditions. Short cuts on joining are not required. What is perhaps needed is a realistic path toward EU membership for Kyiv. In the final account, Ukraine's place on the European map

has to be secured by the EU as a free, independent, and vibrant nation.

## The EU and the Future of the War

As long as the conflict in Ukraine persists, predictions about its future evolution are hard to make. While European unity has been impressive since 24 February 2022, tensions lurk beneath the surface.<sup>24</sup> The Baltic countries and Poland feel vindicated in their diachronic assessment of Russia and push toward a more muscular EU stance, which is not necessarily endorsed by other member states. Recently, President Macron appeared milder when he said that 'Russia must be defeated but not crushed'.<sup>25</sup> In a *New York Times* op-ed, Ivan Krastev theorized the discussion and distinguished three different groups of Europeans, namely the realists, the optimists and the revisionists. In his interpretation, realists do not want the war to broaden. Optimists see a potential end of the war to be combined with the departure of Vladimir Putin from power. And revisionists focus on the systemic nature of the problem and illustrate the war as 'Russias' war'.<sup>26</sup>

In strategic parlance, the continuation of the war in Ukraine brings the EU to an awkward position. Europe is striving to achieve a delicate balance between the type of military support it provides to Ukraine (in tandem with the main support given by the USA) and the risk of escalation of the conflict. At the end of January 2023, Olaf Scholz announced that Germany would send Leopard 2 vehicles to Ukraine, a decision that was paired with the one of President Joe Biden to provide M1 Abrams tanks.<sup>27</sup> This was a landmark moment but the level to which EU member states might be involved in the conflict in the future remains to be seen. The potential dispatch of F-16 fighters is already part of the public and media agenda. Obviously, continuous threats by Moscow for the usage of tactical nuclear weapons in the battlefield cause concern in Europe. These threats might be a bluff. General conditions seem to be different from the Cold War period, however. International relations have entered terra incognita.

The war in Ukraine could have three outcomes: a victory for Kyiv, a victory for Moscow, and a stalemate where conflict would occasionally continue, and stability would be fragile. While the first scenario is the optimum and the second the worst for Europe, the third is a typical situation for 21<sup>st</sup> century wars. It is in

the interests of the EU for hostilities to come to an end but not under terms which will equate the aggressor with the victim. The EU does not have the capacity to impose the terms of a potential settlement but is able to somewhat contribute toward this end. As already mentioned, more emphasis on the European strategic autonomy concept will enable the EU to better defend its interests – even in cases where it agrees with the USA such as the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Due to geography the continuation of the war is more painful for Europe than it is for the USA.

## Conclusion

A Harvard Kennedy School report shows that in the first year of the war, Russia has taken control of an

additional 11% of Ukraine, while 31% of Ukrainians have been forced to leave their homes.<sup>28</sup> The drama has no end. The EU heavily relies on the USA and is not the biggest actor in the conflict. Nevertheless, it has certainly played a role in defending Ukraine and supporting its people militarily, politically, economically, and socially. While American-Russian rivalry goes beyond Ukraine to themes of arms control – Russia recently withdrew from New START – the EU needs to be pragmatic, do its homework and take new steps to better place itself in the international system. A stronger European defense in the context of strategic autonomy and an acceleration of talks for Ukraine to become a full member can perhaps make a difference under the extreme circumstances.

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