

# Commentary



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## European security after Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine

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### Introduction

After five months of war, and eight years since Russia's initial occupation of Ukrainian territories, the region's threat environment remains fluid and dynamic, with unpredictable consequences for European security and the future of Ukraine. Several scenarios exist, though among the realistic ones, none are likely to satisfy all the parties involved. However, one thing can be concluded already – the future of the European security architecture will not be complete without including Ukraine and without an uncompromised resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Several questions need to be answered, even before the end of the Russian aggression:

- Are the current security arrangements and principles adequate to the current threats and risks? Instead of focusing on the European Union (EU) and NATO's role as security actors, the conversation should focus on their readiness to defend values and stand for principles on which united Europe was built.
- Can we divide the security of the EU member-states or NATO allies from their neighbours and partners? Can the "windows" be closed,

the perimeter secured, and the nations be defended when the fire is happening just outside?

- How have technologies changed our tactics, and what new domains of warfare have prevailed? What about questions of total defence and resilience as strategies to be incorporated into any future military-security planning or an alternative to asymmetric warfare preparation.

## Current security arrangements

It is time to acknowledge that the Yalta system of international relations, established after the Second World War, is no longer adequate. The *Helsinki Final Act* and the *UN Charter* failed to prevent a new war in Europe. Notions of sovereignty and territorial integrity have been under question for a long time, but none of Europe's previous crises witnessed the same level of international law violation that we have seen with Russia's aggression against Ukraine in the last eight years. From 2014 to 2015, journalists had asked if this was the start of a new Cold War or a new world order (Martinez 2015; Beale 2015). In 2022, however, we have an implicit answer – we are witnessing a new world disorder. At least countries in the Cold War had developed some rules and principles that, while sometimes manipulated, generally led to a level of trust or at least predictability among the rival states.

Let's put aside the possibility of preventing Russian aggression or issues of the UN and other organizations' efficiency, which seem to be a non-starter given the permanent status of the Russian Federation in the UN Security Council. While most security agreements have been formalized "gentlemen agreements," based on the goodwill of the contracting parties, they always were hostages of the national interests. Yet, over the last half-century, European nations created their own image of values-based societies, including supra-national institutions first and foremost to protect these European values. However, the Russian-Ukrainian war and the approach of some European politicians to that conflict have raised questions that should be answered before we proceed with talks about a new security architecture. Are the current European institutions – EU, NATO, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Council of Europe – ready to defend and stand for values and principles that are core for their establishment?

We only need to turn to the Council of Europe's hesitation to exclude Russia after its annexation of Crimea and its acquiescence to Russia's return to the Parliamentary Assembly in 2019 (Coynash 2021). Or the OSCE's inability to either prevent the closing of the missions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2022 (Liechtenstein 2022) or implement a rule of consensus minus one (Russia) in its deliberations. These are just a few examples when fundamental principles were sacrificed for the sake of political interests.

In addition, we must ask if nation-states are truly ready to fight to defend such things as human rights, democracy, and state sovereignty? Where are the red lines that could lead to the readiness to act?

Two decades earlier, the Responsibility to Protect was a popular concept (Evans 2009), mostly discussed in relation to the Kosovo case but later applied to some Middle East and North Africa crises. Today, it is almost forgotten. Indeed, in the first phase of Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014, many experts and politicians off the record<sup>1</sup> said that NATO and allies could not intervene and send boots on the ground. The reason mentioned? There were no significant causalities, and the annexation of Crimea took place almost peacefully. Even if this view neglects what happened on the ground, Russia's invasion in 2022 has been both a full-scale and dreadful for the civilian population. So, the argument of "no sufficient causalities" is not working anymore.



*Russia's invasion in 2022 has been both a full-scale and dreadful for the civilian population.*

Still, in these conditions, some countries like Estonia have been willing to provide military support equal to one-third of their military budget (Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022), while others like Germany have proven far more hesitant in providing Ukraine with weaponry (Aman et al. 2022). In such circumstances, a US request to Ukraine not to use long-range missiles against Russian territory (Sabbagh 2022) caught many by surprise. If the Russian Armed Forces use their own territory and that of Belarus to attack Ukraine, including with long-range missiles to strike Ukrainian civilian targets, it is hard to understand why Ukraine cannot use the same type of weaponry to counter-attack (Reuters 2022) in order to prevent further escalation and protect civilians.

The next issue is the fact that there is no longer a division between big and small European nations. The economic potential and size of a country does not appear to be major factors that influence a country's authority. Instead, there is a new division between those who are capable and willing to serve as the core of the European security architecture and those who hesitate. France and Germany appear reluctant or incapable of being a locomotive for European security, perceiving it as something given and unchangeable, where only new risks such as cyber or terrorism should receive consideration. Even more, they appeared absolutely unprepared to take responsibility as crisis managers.

Prior to February 2022, there was still a nominal division between Old and New Europe, with old member states seen as having higher moral authority

– this tendency is now over. Eastern European and Baltic states have demonstrated the readiness to take the lead and the responsibility to act. Their ability to be agile, provide support, assess risks, and make decisions have elevated their positions within both the EU and NATO. This fact cannot be neglected in future planning within these organizations. It will gradually influence other spheres of cooperation and priorities, including in the security and defence field.

It is also necessary to reconsider the principle of consensus within the EU and NATO frameworks, so to limit cases when one country can block decisions in the sphere of security. The consensus principle has always been important for both organizations, allowing small states to have a sense of equality and influence in the decision-making process. However, when confronted with negotiations on critical economic measures, this only resulted in bargaining and compromises. And using the same methods in the military and security sphere appear particularly unwise. Hungary's veto on NATO-Ukraine Commission meetings at the highest level (Zoria 2021), or Turkey's obstructionism to Finland and Sweden's future NATO membership (Falk 2022), clearly demonstrate that certain countries are ready to manipulate the consensus principle for their benefit, thus undermining collective security.

## Can security be divided?

Transnational security risks have been a talking point in recent decades in Europe, predominantly covering issues like criminal activities, terrorism and soft security. However, military security remained largely a national responsibility covering only the Alliance's territory. Yet NATO Summit declarations have tended to include more expansive notions, as demonstrated by these quotes: “enhancing NATO's ability to project stability through regional partnerships and capacity building efforts,” “consolidate NATO's contribution to the international community's efforts to project stability beyond our borders” (NATO 2018) and “the success of NATO's partnerships is demonstrated by their strategic contribution to Alliance and international security. They play an important role in supporting NATO's three core tasks and our 360-degree security approach” (NATO 2021b).

Nevertheless, NATO's reaction to Russia's invasion in February 2022 prioritized internal security. Each official statement in winter-spring 2022 underlined the defensive nature of NATO, and each of NATO's action was aimed at increasing its military presence at the borders, in the hope that “closing the perimeter” could prevent conflict spillover. This response, though understandable, nevertheless contradicted the previous vision when partners' security played a role in a holistic, 360-degree security approach. The new NATO Strategic Concept, presented in June 2022, has not provided adequate answers but only repeated the previous references to NATO cooperation with partners in different spheres, including countering hybrid threats, and the need to support partners in being more secure and resilient (NATO 2022b).

The second issue is the changing nature of neutrality. The last few months have already demonstrated a shift, not only with Sweden and Finland applying for NATO membership, but also with Switzerland joining sanctions against Russia; the latter action has been described as a unique step by the Swiss president (The Local 2022). For a decade, many skeptics were talking about the “Finlandization” of Ukraine (Lasheras 2014), in which adopting a Finland-type neutral status for the country would secure it from possible Russian actions and satisfy Moscow’s ambitions. In 2022, however, we are already talking about “Ukrainization” of Finland, in which previously neutral countries adopted a changed understanding of threats and a greater appreciation of alliances, especially the benefits of NATO collective defence.

After months of war, experts in Ukraine have started to say that we are ready for “Finlandization 2.0” – where a country’s neutral status cannot prevent Russian aggression. As such, the choice of NATO membership and collective defence is not only a choice of a military alliance, but the values and principles behind it. If neutrality is becoming a rudiment, this raises an important question: is it possible for a country to remain in-between the conflicting parties? Taking a side in this war is not a question of strategic choices or partners’ support. As an aggressor and invader is clearly identified, it is a question of existential and moral choice.

Supporting Ukraine means making the war shorter. Whether it will be a new security architecture or an upgrade of the old existing institutions and treaties, both scenarios cannot be implemented without the end of the Russian-Ukrainian war. For the Russian Federation, a frozen conflict or a continuation of the low-intensity warfare is a beneficial option, as it would allow Europe and Ukraine to be on high alert and spend their resources for defence rather than development, thereby provoking additional instability. As this war is not just about Ukraine, both the EU and NATO member states should consider whether they want to win this war or compromise their own futures.

## New technologies, old tactics, and asymmetric warfare

The last eight years of Russia’s so-called hybrid war against Ukraine, and the last five months of direct military actions, have made many nations reconsider their military strategy and tactics. The time for lessons learned and an agile approach to best practices has already begun. But the next few years will also require the reconsideration of national defence plans and procurement programs. Recent events also raise questions about how countries might better introduce asymmetrical warfare. The latter raises questions about technology use, its efficiency against conventional weaponry and new organizational and recruiting models (territorial defence, international legion, logistics or surveillance outsourced partially to partners, etc.).

First of all, the capabilities and forces readiness of many European states need to be evaluated. Second, the classical focus on interoperability, which has been a core for NATO allies, may be supplemented with the idea of capability-sharing – specifically, weaponry and ammunition transfer from one nation to another in cases of crisis development. The current NATO battle groups deployed along the Eastern Flank is the first element of such capability-sharing. A good example is the NATO air policing mission for the Baltics, which involves member states that have airforce capabilities voluntarily contributing to this mission (NATO 2022a). However, the Russian-Ukrainian war also demonstrates that sometimes the states may need weaponry and ammunition that they lack (either in numbers or in capabilities, like the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS)) without requiring the deployment of third-country personnel.

The next issue is surveillance and communications, as well as the use of unmanned vehicles. While both surveillance assets and combat drones have been used for a decade, many countries didn't pay sufficient attention to their use in combat. The practical use of these technologies in Ukraine have made many European countries reconsider their acquisition and application. Also, the current military situation allows testing of the new equipment and ammunition, for example, US Phoenix Ghost drones that should be delivered to Ukraine. Moreover, stable communication was always a priority in warfare – and Ukraine is no exception. For example, Starlink technology has offered an invaluable communications solution for Ukrainians, turning Ukrainian hot spots into a testing ground for their military use.

“*The capabilities and forces readiness of many European states need to be evaluated.*”

Furthermore, the maritime dimension of warfare needs proper post-war analysis. More attention to commercial navigation safety and port openness should be paid, as well as warfare tactics of a blockade in the pre-war period. Military exercises, manipulations with drills, and the closure of significant parts of the sea created conditions that made it easier for Russia to secure control over the Black Sea without a serious sea battle.

Lastly, the Russia-Ukraine war demonstrated the need to elaborate on the concept of resilience and its role in national security. Over the past 10 years, an understanding has emerged that military efforts alone are not enough for the state and society's security. A civil defence system is needed to increase defence capabilities and effectiveness, while ensuring the readiness needed to reduce society's risks and vulnerabilities in war and peacetime (Shelest 2021).

The 2021 report for NATO Parliamentary Assembly acknowledges that NATO's military capabilities and actions largely depend on the support of the civilian sector, expertise and infrastructure (Garriaud-Maylam 2021). Military forces increasingly depend on civilian and business support for transport, communications, and supplies, such as water and food (NATO 2021a). At the same time, however, a country's military and security sector are becoming increasingly involved in guaranteeing the baselines for resilience; this includes securing critical infrastructure, cyber security, safe movement of the big masses of people, safeguarding communications, food supply, and transportation, among other things. This increased military-civilian interdependence cannot be neglected in any future security and military planning. The total defence concept incorporated by some states, such as Sweden, is not a particular answer to modern warfare and this increased interdependence of the military and civilian components, because it mostly concentrates on the state security sector.

## Conclusion

The fears that the current war in Ukraine can turn into World War III seem emotional rather than rational. We need to understand it is already a European war, not just a Russian-Ukrainian one. This will make the decision-making process smoother and political choices easier. The attempt to build a new or upgraded security architecture in Europe needs to start from the lessons learned process. Evaluation of mistakes and misperceptions regarding the adversary, analysing threats and their ability to shift from soft to hard security, and the honest assessment of existing capabilities; these are the prerequisites for a more sober European approach to security. Without it, the chances of being caught in the same traps are high.

We should be open to the questions that this war is raising. We will not have answers in a month or two. There may be several years of diplomatic and political talks between sides, as in the 1970s before the creation of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). But current questions need a wider societal response. Do we need new rules or new principles for the new security architecture? Should we defend our values or be ready to compromise? Does European security mean only EU or NATO security or also security for those who made their European choice? The answers to these questions will continue to shape European security after the end of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine.

# About the author



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Dr. Shelest was an adviser of the Working Group preparing Ukrainian Navy Strategy 2035 and was involved in working groups developing the Foreign Policy Strategy of Ukraine, Asian Strategy for MFA, and Ukraine’s NATO Public Communication Strategy. She led different policy-related projects, among others: Scorecards of the Ukrainian Foreign Policy (2015-2021); Ukraine-NATO: Enhanced Level (2021-2022); The Hybrid War Decade: Lessons Learned to Move Forward Successfully (2019), Ukraine’s Elections in Focus (2019); Foreign Policy Recommendations for the Parliament of Ukraine (2017-2021).

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# Endnotes

- 1 Author's personal communications and interviews with experts in Belgium, Italy, Germany, etc. in 2014-2015.

*constructive* *important* *forward-thinking*  
*high-quality* *insightful*  
*active*

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