

The Geopolitics and Tragedy of the War in Ukraine

Gergely Varga

January 2025

The Geopolitics and Tragedy of the War in Ukraine

Gergely Varga

The paper argues that war in Ukraine is primarily a result of a geopolitical confrontation which is best understood through a realist lens. However, factors associated with the liberal-normative approach complemented and deepened Western-Russian and Ukrainian-Russian tensions. A Western policy that would have been free of illusions and less based on ideological doctrines, more focused on economic cooperation and restrained on security issues, could have eased the Western-Russian tensions.

The problem wasn't European engagement with Russia, but engagement from a position of weakness and excessive vulnerability to Russia and to the US. The real dilemma in Ukraine since February 2022 has been not between a Ukrainian victory with stronger Western military support or a Ukrainian collapse without it, but whether the West will risk a full-scale war with Russia - even a nuclear war – to pursue a Ukrainian victory with direct military involvement, or, albeit painful, whether it will move towards a compromise which takes into account the political realities.

The tenets of the Powell Doctrine, which sets out the conditions for a winning strategy, were lacking from the Western policy towards Ukraine in terms of NATO membership and in terms of the strategy pursued in war: the existence of adequate military capabilities and the willingness to employ them, the existence of vital national or allied interests and clearly achievable objectives with a clear willingness to bear the associated risks and costs.

Ending the war requires a combination of a willingness to compromise and the restoration of credible deterrence, the latter also implying the formulation of more credible and defensible political and military objectives that are more in tune with the political realities.

Introduction

The war in Ukraine is the most obvious sign that power politics has returned to Europe in its most tragic form. Analyses of the causes of the war tend to focus on the 'why' and the 'who', rather than the 'how', on the events and processes that led first to Russia's initial aggression against Ukraine in 2014, limited in scale and territory, and then against the whole of Ukraine in February 2022. The dominant 'pro-Ukrainian' and pro-Western narratives on the one hand, and 'pro-Russian' explanations on the other, about the causes of the war in public discourse and expert analysis tend to be presented as mutually exclusive narratives.

However, the historical events and processes underlying these narratives are rather the result of a series of mutually reinforcing actions and counteractions. Not only do the local, regional and geopolitical levels of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict interact with one another, but the seemingly contradictory and often normative factors of the conflict actually tend to complement each other, providing a more complete understanding of the long process that led to the full-scale Russian invasion and lately, in some respect, to the globalisation of the war.

The aim of this study is to unpack and contextualise the key historical factors of the main narratives about the war in Ukraine in order to point out the major policy failures of all sides which led to a conflict spiralling out of control. While there are many explanations for the war, reading the literature and following the public discourse, these could be summarised in two dominant narratives, one we label as a pro-Ukrainian or pro-Western and one as a pro-Russian narrative.

As a starting point, we outline the main political elements and arguments of these two narratives. Then, we will examine the most important historical elements of these narratives from a geopolitical perspective: the theoretical approaches to NATO enlargement in general and in the case of Ukraine, the evolution of the post-Cold War Western-Russian relations and, in particular, of the European-Russian relations in the shadow of US hegemony, as well as the significance of the 'Maidan' events of 2014. Finally, the analysis of the war since February 2022 will focus on the contradictions of Western war strategy, highlighting the issues surrounding the concept of credible deterrence and outlining the possible path towards peace.

Narratives about the causes of the war in Ukraine

According to the dominant Ukrainian and Western narrative, President Putin has been driven by Russian imperialist ambitions since the mid-2000s the latest, and his

aggression against Ukraine since 2014 is just a stepping stone to wider Russian imperialist ambitions covering large parts of the former Soviet sphere of interest, including some NATO member states.¹ Putin's questioning of the existence of the Ukrainian nation and of an independent Ukrainian statehood reflects an imperialist outlook that goes far back in Russian history, in which the promotion of Russian nationalism is an instrumental tool. Closely linked to this resurgent Russian imperialism is the authoritarian nature of the political system led by Putin, and from this perspective, the potential success of Ukrainian democracy, especially since the Maidan Revolution in 2014 onwards, posed such a threat to the stability of Putin's regime that he could not overlook.

According to the opposite Russian narrative, which is at least partially shared by some realist experts, the decisive cause of the war in Ukraine was the eastern expansion of NATO, and with that, the US sphere of influence.² According to this interpretation, the prospect of Ukraine's membership in NATO and its increasingly close military cooperation with the West posed a threat to Russia's fundamental security interests. On this basis, the war in Ukraine is in fact a proxy war provoked by the United States and its European allies against Russia. This narrative is sometimes complemented by the fact that anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism, encouraged or overlooked by the West, is also a significant local factor in the conflict.

This paper argues that these seemingly contradictory narratives are two sides of the same coin, the main historical developments and causes leading up to the war captured by these narratives provide us with mutually reinforcing explanations. As will be discussed below, the security dilemma, a realist premise of international relations, helps to shed light on how the main Western and Russian geopolitical moves in Eastern Europe and Ukraine interacted with each other, and how the disputes over Ukraine led to a negative spiral in Western-Russian relations. Another realist concept, the balance of threats, helps to understand why it was Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO that was a red line for Moscow, and not previous enlargements. In our analysis, we do not reject the liberal-normative explanation of the war in Ukraine outright, but argue that

¹ Timothy Snyder: Ukraine Holds the Future. The War Between Democracy and Nihilism. *Foreign Affairs* September/October 2022; Serhii Plokhii: *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2023; Gwendolyn Sasse: *Russia's War Against Ukraine*. Polity Press, Berlin, 2023; Francis Fukuyama: Why Ukraine Will Win. *Journal of Democracy*, September 2022

² John Mearsheimer: Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault. *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014; Andreas M. Bock - Ingo Henneberg - Friedrich Plank: "If you compress the spring, it will snap back hard": The Ukrainian crisis and the balance of threat theory. *International Journal* Vol 70 No. 1; Stephen Walt: Friends in Need. What the War in Ukraine has Revealed About Alliances. *Foreign Affairs* 2023 February

the factors relevant to such an approach complemented and deepened what was essentially a geopolitical conflict.

A liberal and realist interpretation of NATO enlargement

Two fundamental principles of European security have clashed over the issue of NATO enlargement: the right of sovereign states to freely choose to join any alliance and the principle of the indivisibility of European security.³ The principle of defending the sovereign foreign policy of small states in post-war Eastern Europe was combined with the legitimate desire to join the liberal democratic community in the West, coupled with the understanding that NATO was a purely defensive alliance and that its enlargement posed no threat to other countries.⁴ NATO membership thus took on a normative connotation associated with the liberal school of thought, although the main motivating factor in the Central and Eastern European capitals was always a classic realist consideration: maximising defence guarantees against the Russian threat, which could be revived at any time.⁵

The predominantly normative interpretation of NATO enlargement also overlooks the fact that even in the heyday of the liberal international order, the laws of power politics remained in force, especially in the foreign policy of the United States. Irrespective of whether there was a Western promise to Moscow at the end of the Cold War that NATO would not expand eastwards, there is evidence that Moscow has always been suspicious of NATO's eastward expansion.⁶ This suspicion did not disappear during the constructive Western-Russian atmosphere of the Yeltsin era in the early 1990s, nor with the conclusion of the NATO-Russia Founding Treaty in 1997, and Moscow precisely saw its fears confirmed by NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999.

³ Andrew Monaghan (ed): *The Indivisibility of Security: Russia and Euro-Atlantic Security*. NATO Defence College, January 2010 https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/113832/fp_13-1.pdf; Alexander Graef and Ulrich Kühn: A Letter from Moscow: (In)divisible Security and Helsinki 2.0. *Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy* 02/14/2022 <https://ifsh.de/en/news-detail/a-letter-from-moscow-indivisible-security-and-helsinki-20>

⁴ Robert Person and Michael McFaul: Why NATO Is More Than Democracy's Best Defence. *Journal of Democracy*, April 2024

⁵ Ronald D. Asmus: *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*. Columbia University Press 2002; Tamas Magyarics: Hungary in NATO: The Case of a Half Empty Glass. In: Janne Haaland Matlary, Magnus Petersson: *NATO's European Allies. Military Capability and Political Will*. Palgrave Macmillan London 2013

⁶ Elias Götz: Explaining Russia's Opposition to NATO Enlargement: Strategic Imperatives, Ideas, or Domestic Politics? In: Daniel S. Hamilton - Kristina Spohr: *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*. Brookings Institution Press 2019

Despite the era of globalisation and democratisation, US power politics were still present all around the world,⁷ including the US military interventions⁸ in the 1990s (Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, former Yugoslavia, Iraq) and the unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty (2001), the excesses of the war on terrorism (2001 onwards), the second Iraq war (2003), the Bush administration's missile deployment plans for Eastern Europe (2007-2008) and, later, the selective Western military intervention (Libya) of the Arab Spring (2011).⁹ Even if normative factors - such as humanitarian considerations - played a role in some of the aforementioned wars, the importance of geopolitical power factors in the relevant US decisions was evident. At the same time, the "colour revolutions" in Eastern Europe in the Russian 'near abroad' in the 2000s were signs that these countries were becoming more democratic and moving towards Euro-Atlantic integration, which at the same time also meant a reduction of Russia's influence in the region.¹⁰

In sum, NATO's eastward expansion has undeniably brought strategic advantages to the US (new allies, military bases, ISR capabilities) at the expense of Russia's positions. Successive NATO enlargements have taken place without any significant Russian opposition, not because of Russia's acceptance of the West's vision of European security, but because of its weakness. In essence, this is the classic 'security dilemma', where security gains for one side have led to an increased sense of threat for the other. The liberal international order, including NATO's eastward enlargement, for all its benefits and normative elements (the liberal rules-based world order) was ultimately the result of a Pax-Americana.

Reasons for the failure of the "Common European House" and its conceptual successors

Gorbachev's House of Europe¹¹ proposal and subsequent initiatives such as the Charter of Paris,¹² later the concept of a "Greater Europe"¹³ and even Russia's possible membership of NATO were all discussed in the decade following the end of the Cold War. Their failure can partly be attributed to the two strongest military powers in

⁷ Löfflmann, G.: The Bush Doctrine redux: changes and continuities in American grand strategy since '9/11'. *International Politics* 61, 501–522 (2024)

⁸ Jennifer Kavanagh and Bryan Frederick: Why Force Fails The Dismal Track Record of U.S. Military Interventions. *Foreign Affairs*, March 30, 2023

⁹ Christian Henderson: The 2010 United States National Security Strategy and the Obama Doctrine of 'Necessary Force'. *Journal of Conflict & Security Law* Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 2010), pp. 403-434

¹⁰ Lucan A. Way: The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions. *Journal of Democracy*. Vol 13, Issue 3 2008

¹¹ Neil Malcolm: The 'Common European Home' and Soviet European Policy. *International Affairs* Vol. 65, No. 4 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 659-676

¹² Charter of Paris For a New Europe <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/6/39516.pdf>

¹³ Konstantin Petrovich Kurylev: The Idea of a "Greater Europe" in Russian Foreign Policy: Past and Present. *Journal of Russian History* 19(2):438-447

Europe, the US and Russia. These two great powers have always had different visions of the European security architecture or the Eurasian economic system, or about the conditions under which Russia could integrate into the West.

At the same time, intra-European disputes on these issues were not negligible factors, typically due to antagonism between the Franco-German Western axis and the Eastern European countries, the latter usually supported by the generally Atlanticist and anti-Russian UK and Northern Europe. Not only were the Eastern European countries the main promoters of NATO enlargement from the early 1990s,¹⁴ but they were also, in a broader sense, strongly opposed to Russia's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, or at least made it subject to extremely strict conditions.

At the same time, despite economic and energy cooperation between Moscow and the major Western European countries, including Germany and France, these relations have also been marked by deepening political tensions as Putin gradually consolidated his power. On the political and ideological level (democracy, rule of law, human rights), the suppression of the Moscow protests in 2012, linked to the then Russian presidential elections, proved to be a major breaking point.¹⁵ The annexation of Crimea and the "Maidan revolution" only gave a further impetus to this vicious circle.

Regardless of the geopolitical interests of the United States, in particular its policy of keeping Russia out of Europe¹⁶ - see, for example, its opposition to Nord Stream - the realisation of the concept of a "Wider Europe" from Lisbon to Vladivostok would have been an extraordinary challenge. It is difficult to imagine the creation of such a regional system with the inclusion of also Russia similar to the one European countries have actually managed to achieve in recent decades, with its complementary and complex political, economic and security European institutions (EU, EFTA, Council of Europe, NATO, OSCE). Russia is simply too large and has too many different characteristics to be easily integrated into the Euro-Atlantic structures on terms acceptable to all, in a similar way as other Eastern European countries have been integrated.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that a Western policy with fewer illusions and less doctrinaire ideology, focused on economic cooperation and more pragmatic and restrained on

¹⁴ Ronald D. Asmus: *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*. Columbia University Press 2002

¹⁵ Anna-Sophie Maass: *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*, Routledge 2017; Marco Sidi: The partnership that failed: EU-Russia relations and the war in Ukraine. *Journal of European Integration*, 44:6, 893-898

¹⁶ Matthew Rojansky: The U.S., Germany, and Nord Stream 2. *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Perspective* 2020 December <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/usa/17088.pdf>, F; Pál Dunay: Russia and European Great Powers: France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In: Graeme P. Herd: *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, 2021

security issues, would have escalated the Western-Russian conflict to where we are today. Moreover, from the perspective of the aforementioned US power politics, successive rounds of NATO enlargement and Western support for the "colour revolutions" in Eastern Europe in the early 2000s inevitably reinforced the notion of increasing geopolitical competition with the West in Moscow. From a realpolitik perspective, the external international factors affecting Russia and the internal political processes were mutually reinforcing.

Regarding Russia's internal political developments, the bitter failure of Western neoliberalism in Russia in the 1990s, followed by Putin's successful economic-political consolidation, unsurprisingly reinforced autocratic tendencies. As for external factors, the political, institutional and intellectual expansion of the West towards Russia's borders and US power-politics were viewed with suspicion and then as a growing threat not only by the Putin regime but also by a large part of Russian society.¹⁷ Meanwhile, since the mid-2010s, a steadily developing China, both politically and economically, has appeared to Putin as an increasingly attractive alternative.¹⁸

Ukraine's NATO membership and the balance of threat

The equality and sovereignty of states is a fundamental principle of the liberal international system, but the laws of realpolitik cannot be circumvented. NATO enlargement and the right to freely join alliances cannot be blamed for the war in Ukraine in general, the specific country or countries involved are the issue. International norms are generally enforced when there is a proper balance of power, when the balance is significantly disturbed, the enforcement of norms usually leads to conflict. In the case of previous NATO enlargements to the east, the balance was more or less maintained, but the NATO aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia have threatened to upset the balance fatally for Moscow.

Geography is the essence of geopolitics, and the history of NATO enlargement and Ukraine's NATO membership is no different. Stephen Walt's theory of the balance of threat identifies the factors that determine states' perceptions of threats: aggregate

¹⁷ Fernandez, Nicole (2024) "Putin's Pivot: Understanding the Evolution of Russia's Anti-Western Stance, Political Analysis: Vol. 22, Article 5; Kseniya Kirillova: How Deep Is Russians' Anti-Western Sentiment? *International Centre for Defence and Security* <https://icds.ee/en/how-deep-is-russians-anti-western-sentiment/>; New Survey Finds Most Russians See Ukrainian War as Defense Against West, NORC 9 January 2024 <https://www.norc.org/research/library/new-survey-finds-most-russians-see-ukrainian-war-as-defense-against-west.html>

¹⁸ Gilbert Rozman -Gaye Christoffersen: *Putin's Turn to the East" in the Xi Jinping Era*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2024; Olga Alexeeva - Cédéric Lasserre: The Evolution of Sino-Russian Relations as Seen from Moscow: The Limits of Strategic Rapprochement. *China Perspectives* 2018/3 <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/8197> <https://icds.ee/en/how-deep-is-russians-anti-western-sentiment/>

power, proximity to the enemy, offensive capabilities and perceived intentions.¹⁹ Given that Russia has perceived the United States as its only real military threat since the end of the Cold War, Moscow's perception of the level of threat posed by the various rounds of NATO enlargement has remained almost constant from the perspective of three of these factors, with the exception of one dimension: geographical proximity, or geopolitical location more broadly. From Mackinder to Brzezinski, it is a basic geopolitical axiom that Russian history and geography destines Ukraine to play a special role in Russian strategic thinking, in Russia's security and its place in the world.²⁰ For this reason, Ukraine's membership of NATO has always been a red line for Moscow.²¹

From the perspective of countries that have joined or aspired to join NATO, it is important to note that enhancing security has always been the key objective, while alliance-building is seen as a particularly important and effective means of achieving this. However, for states in geopolitical buffer zones such as Taiwan, the small oil monarchies of the Arabian Gulf, Singapore, Ukraine or Georgia, particular care is needed in assessing whether joining an alliance system will actually enhance security or whether it will increase the risk of war. Of course, member states deciding on enlargement have a similar responsibility in their decision, and it is no coincidence that the Washington Treaty contains a provision to this effect in its 10th paragraph.²²

In order to reduce the risk of confrontation with Russia, Ukraine and the West should have taken more account of Russian foreign policy interests. To use the analogy of Finland's Cold War situation, its dependence on the Soviet Union was far from ideal in terms of foreign policy freedom of action, but it was still a viable option in terms of realistic alternatives. By rejecting NATO membership and adopting a more constructive policy towards Russia on some of the most critical security issues for Moscow, Ukraine could have gained greater foreign policy space than Finland ever had during the Cold War, and surely in comparison to that it has today in its extremely vulnerable position.

The significance of the “Maidan revolution” in the conflict

¹⁹ Stephen M. Walt: *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University Press 1987

²⁰ Halford J. Mackinder, Geopolitics, and the Heartland Thesis. *The International History Review* Vol. 36, No. 5, (October 2014), pp. 835-857 (23 pages); Zbigniew Brzezinski: *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. Basic Books 1997

²¹ Nyet Means Nyet: Russia's Nato Enlargement Redlines Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. 2008 February https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MOSCOW265_a.html

²² The North Atlantic Treaty Washington D.C. - 4 April 1949 https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm

The laws of realpolitik apply not only in the geopolitical dimension, but also at the local level of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. On the one hand, the rise of Ukrainian nationalism, the restriction of Russian minority rights after the Maidan revolution, and on the other hand, Kremlin-fuelled Russian nationalism in the east of the country and in Crimea, first strengthened and then consolidated the efforts to secede from Ukraine.

Without a doubt the Maidan protests of 2014 and the resulting changes in Ukrainian domestic politics played a prominent role among the immediate triggers of the Russo-Ukrainian war. While the Ukrainian and Western narratives interpret Maidan as a broad societal stand for democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration,²³ the Russian narrative sees the Western intervention as a coup that paved the way for Ukrainian nationalism and the transformation of Ukraine into an American proxy.²⁴

Undisputedly there was widespread support for Maidan's goals in the final months of Viktor Yanukovich's presidency, and it is likely that after Yanukovich's backtracking on the EU Association Agreement in late 2013, the president was doomed to domestic failure.²⁵ However, this does not rule out the possibility that Western powers supported the anti-Yanukovich protesters and hastened the president's downfall in a variety of ways that went beyond democratic means.²⁶

Even if it was not the decisive factor, the Ukrainian and Western narrative either denies malign Western 'involvement' or sees Western support for Yanukovich's downfall, including "active measures", as justified. Both options negate Russian interests in ways that go beyond the Putin regime's own self-interests. Indeed, the events in Maidan have condensed Russia's worst fears about Ukraine: the threat of losing the strategic advantage of Crimea and the threat of Ukraine's NATO membership; the expansion of the West's overall political and economic influence into areas of key Russian interest; Maidan as a showcase for Western political interference; the erosion of minority rights for the masses of Russians concentrated in Crimea and the Donbas; and the

²³ The Significance of Euromaidan for Ukraine and Europe. *Wilson Center Analyses*, 21 November 2018 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-significance-euromaidan-for-ukraine-and-europe>

²⁴ David Marples: Russia's perceptions of Ukraine: Euromaidan and historical conflicts. *European Politics and Society* 1 March 2016, 17(4):1-14; Emma Mateo: The Ukraine Crisis: A Clash of Narratives? *University Consortium* 2018 <https://uc.web.ox.ac.uk/article/the-ukraine-crisis-a-clash-of-narratives>

²⁵ The Significance of Euromaidan for Ukraine and Europe. *Wilson Center Analyses*, 21 November 2018 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-significance-euromaidan-for-ukraine-and-europe>

²⁶ The most well known evidence of this is the published telephone conversation between then US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Kiev Geoffrey Pyatt, in which they discuss US support for Ukrainian opposition politicians in the midst of the Maidan events. Ukraine crisis: Transcript of leaked Nuland-Pyatt call. *BBC* 7 February 2014 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957>

transboundary impact of these developments on the concept of Russian national greatness and civilisational mission.²⁷

At the same time the Maidan brought to the fore Ukrainian society's desire for democracy and independence, the fragility of the Ukrainian political system, the country's desired future geopolitical orientation and vulnerability to great power games, as well as the strengthening of Ukrainian national consciousness.

Yet, the idea that the Maidan revolution demonstrated the strength of Ukrainian democracy in the eyes of Putin and the fear of this Ukrainian democratic model triggered Russia's initial aggression needs to be questioned. Firstly, given that the Ukrainian political system has so long been subject to oligarchy, corruption and government incompetence since its independence,²⁸ Ukrainian antipathy towards Russia, and the stiff resistance that emerged once an all-out war broke out in 2022, was fuelled primarily by nationalism, not by the success of the Ukrainian democracy. Secondly, not only for Putin's inner circle but for a significant part of Russian society, Ukraine's rather fragile democratic political system was not a successful alternative political model, but an eminently suitable arena for Western influence.

In addition to the geopolitical dimensions of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, the clash of Ukrainian and Russian nationalisms, rooted in deep historical grievances, in combination with the internal political dynamics of both countries, have together contributed to the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.²⁹ A Ukrainian policy that would have been free of nationalist excesses and doctrinaire ideology, more pragmatic on security issues, focused on economic cooperation and more consistent in implementing Ukraine's commitments to the Minsk process would likely have produced different results. The responsibility of the European and US leadership for the failure of the Minsk process could also be mentioned, especially in the light of

²⁷ David R. Marples Russia's perceptions of Ukraine: Euromaidan and historical conflicts. *European Politics and Society* Volume 17, 2016 - Issue 4: Ukraine in Crisis; Jonáš Syrovátka - Jan Holzer: Euromaidan(s) in Russian Academic Literature. *Russian Politics* Jun 2021; Fabian Linde: The Civilizational Turn in Russian Political Discourse: From Pan-Europeanism to Civilizational Distinctiveness. *The Russian Review* Vol. 75, No. 4 (October 2016), pp. 604-625 (22 pages)

²⁸ Anders Åslund: The Maidan and Beyond: Oligarchs, Corruption, and European Integration. *The Journal of Democracy* July 2014 Vol 25 No. 3 64-73; Kravtsov, Semen - Orobets, Kostiantyn - Shyshpanova, Nataliia - Vovchenko, Oksana - Berezovska-Chmil, Olena. Progress and Challenges in Combating Corruption in Ukraine: Pathways Forward. *Journal of Strategic Security* 17, no. 2 (2024): 28-43; Ukraine's Uncertain Path to the EU, CSS Analyses in Security Policy No. 314, November 2022 <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/ghs/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse314-EN.pdf>

²⁹ Taras Kuzio: Competing Nationalisms, Euromaidan, and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* Vol. 15, No. 1, 201; Mikhail Pogrebinskiy: Russians in Ukraine: Before and after Euromaidan. *E-IR* 26 March 2015 <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/54903>

subsequent statements by Angela Merkel and Francois Holland.³⁰ Nevertheless, none of these arguments call into question the illegality of Russia's aggression in March 2014 and February 2022, and its responsibility for the political manoeuvres that have systematically undermined the Minsk process in between.

Too hardline or too conciliatory a Western policy?

NATO's eastward expansion, or alleged interference in Ukraine's internal affairs, is only part of the broader question of whether the West's policy towards Russia has been too confrontational or too conciliatory. But this simple binary choice is just as misleading as narrowing down the cause of the war to a single factor. In the process of states asserting their interests, it matters what kind of power dimension is concerned, what means are used, and what the specific goals are.

It's worth pointing out the defining aspects of Russian-European relations in the context of the Ukraine-related conflict cluster. Many European countries, including Germany, did not make a mistake in establishing close energy and economic cooperation with Russia over forty years. Rather, the problem arose much more from the fact that such a policy was pursued while allowing itself to drift into a one-sided military and geopolitical dependence on America, and on the other hand, into an excessive unilateral energy dependence on Russia.

In the early 2000s, Europe was less dependent on the United States economically and militarily than it would be ten or twenty years later. This allowed for a more autonomous foreign policy of the "old Europe", as the Franco-German policy during the Iraq war demonstrated. Today, stronger European strategic autonomy would give Europe more room to manoeuvre *vis-a-vis* Washington. This is a key issue from the perspective of Moscow's security perceptions, as Russia feels fundamentally threatened by the United States. Even with more powerful defence capabilities, Europe would not pose a similar security threat to Russia because of Europe's national divisions and its much more modest strategic strike force compared to the American nuclear arsenal.³¹

In addition to the lack of European strategic autonomy, the West has supported otherwise flawed strategic goals – NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia – without the willingness to bear the burdens and risks necessary for some hope of

³⁰ Both Angela Merkel and Francois Hollande later said that the Minsk process was seen more as a tool to give Ukraine time to rearm. Ukraine war: Merkel says she lacked power to influence Putin BBC 25 November 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63751688>; Hollande: 'There will only be a way out of the conflict when Russia fails on the ground. *The Kyiv Independent* 22 December 2022 <https://kyivindependent.com/hollande-there-will-only-be-a-way-out-of-the-conflict-when-russia-fails-on-the-ground/>

³¹ Dmitri Trenin: Russia's Threat Perception and Strategic Posture. *Strategic Studies Institute* November 2007, pp. 34-47, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=829>

success.³² The questions of the Powell Doctrine apply not only to war but also to alliance-building in peace: are we dealing with vital national/allied interests, is there a clearly achievable objective, have we assessed the risks and costs? The validity of these propositions has been demonstrated by the events of 2008 (Georgia), of 2014 (Crimea and Donbas), and the gradual, limited, and conditional Western military support provided to Ukraine since 2022.

All in all, Europe's military weakness, its energy dependence, and the foreign policy mistakes resulting from the hubris of successive American administrations have reinforced the worst reflexes of the Kremlin's rulers. Meanwhile, prior to the 2022 invasion Ukraine received an increasing amount of Western military assistance, just enough to make Russia wary of an unfavourable military balance developing in the Donbas, but not enough to deter Moscow. However, effort to provide Ukraine with much greater military support, coupled with promises of NATO membership, would probably have provoked a response from Moscow much sooner, as Angela Merkel herself confirms in her memoirs.³³

The decisive moment leading up to the full-scale invasion came when the credibility of American deterrence evaporated during the first year of the Biden administration, and on the European side, Angela Merkel, who had been able to play an important mediating role, disappeared from the political scene. From Putin's perspective, it seemed that a window of opportunity had opened for Russia to change the status quo in Ukraine before further strategic decline or Russia takes place over the next 5-10 years due to Russia's adverse economic and demographic trends.

What has happened with Ukraine is a classic case of Mearsheimer's tragedy of great power politics,³⁴ a clash of interests between two great powers: the fear of a declining great power being completely ousted from its traditional sphere of influence, and the ambition of another declining, but still "primus inter pares" superpower to maximize its European objectives. The war is also a tragedy in the sense of Robert Kaplan's interpretation,³⁵ in which the normative and legitimate aspects of maximalist Ukrainian objectives — full internal and external sovereignty as well as the full protection of territorial integrity — coupled with the pursuit of maximalist Western interests

³² As US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell set the conditions for the success of the US military intervention in the 1990-91 Gulf War. Doug Bandow: Resurrect the Powell Doctrine, October 28, 2021, *Cato Commentary* <https://www.cato.org/commentary/resurrect-powell-doctrine>

³³ Angela Merkel delayed Ukraine's NATO bid over Russia fears, memoir reveals. *Euronews* 21 november 2024 <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/21/angela-merkel-delayed-ukraines-nato-bid-over-russia-fears-memoir-reveals>

³⁴ John J. Mearsheimer: *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W. W. Norton & Company 2001

³⁵ Robert D. Kaplan: *The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power*. Yale University Press, 2023

ultimately contributed to the escalation of violence. At the same time, the nature of the Ukrainian political system, as well as the domestic political calculations and nationalism of the Putin regime were important but rather complementary factors in the the conflict.

It would be wrong to suggest that a different Ukrainian and Western policy alone surely would have guaranteed peace. However, a militarily stronger Europe - in terms of both capabilities and military-industrial capacity - less dependent on Russian energy, and a more realistic US assessment of the limits of its own sphere of action and the limits of NATO enlargement, would certainly have reduced the chances of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The contradictions of the Western war strategy

Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, the Western strategy has been based on supporting Ukraine in order to protect its territorial integrity and, more generally, to defend fundamental international norms and the rules-based international order. However, the fundamental question has never been whether the actions against Russia are lawful or justifiable, but rather what realistic goals can be achieved and what the consequences of this strategy will be. According to the Ukrainian and Western narrative, especially since the summer of 2022, Ukraine's victory is merely a question of whether, in addition to Ukraine's perseverance, the West provides sufficient conventional military, economic and international political support for its defence against Russia.³⁶ Moreover, Ukrainian victory is achievable even without NATO sending troops to Ukraine or a direct NATO-Russian military confrontation.

The likelihood of finding success with this strategy was already questionable even during the unexpected Ukrainian victories in the autumn of 2022, but since then, the achievement of this goal has become unattainable. Even General Mike Milley,³⁷ the US Joint Chief of Staff, was skeptical about Ukraine's chances of victory in the autumn of 2022, but other Western experts who could hardly be accused of pro-Russian

³⁶ Ukraine can still win this war, says Poland's FM, *GZero* 13 July 2024 <https://www.gzeromedia.com/gzero-world-with-ian-bremmer/ukraine-can-still-win-this-war-says-poland-s-fm>; Biden says US wants Ukraine to 'win'. *Yahoo News* 12 December 2023 <https://www.yahoo.com/news/biden-says-us-wants-ukraine-224946475.html>; Ukraine 'can win' war against Russia, says NATO chief Stoltenberg. *Euronews* 15 May 2022 <https://www.euronews.com/2022/05/15/ukraine-war-zelenskyy-hails-eurovision-victory-and-vows-to-host-contest-in-2023>; Putin must recognise he cannot win Ukraine war, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz says at UN. *CNBC* 21 September 2021 <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/21/putin-must-recognize-he-cannot-win-ukraine-war-olaf-scholz-says-at-un.html>; Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the Ukraine Recovery Conference. 1 June 2023 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/keynote-speech-president-von-der-leyen-ukraine-recovery-conference-2023-2023-06-21_en

³⁷ U.S. scrambles to reassure Ukraine after Milley comments on negotiations. *Politico* November 14 2022 <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/11/14/u-s-ukraine-milley-negotiations-00066777>

sentiments also expressed similar views as early as 2022-2023, stating that Ukraine would not be able to win this war with the goals set by the Ukrainian leadership.³⁸

Moreover, it is highly doubtful that faster and more extensive Western arms deliveries would have definitely led to a Ukrainian victory. On the one hand, given the internal dynamics of the Putin regime and the anti-Western perceptions of a significant part of Russian society, it is likely that a broader Russian mobilisation in the face of a NATO intervention would have been easier for the regime to sell politically. It is also likely that North Korea, Iran, and China would have increased their support for Moscow.³⁹ Since February 2022, all three countries, including China,⁴⁰ have had an interest in ensuring that Russia does not suffer a clear military defeat in the war. At this point, we are still dealing only with conventional military capabilities, with Russia's nuclear arsenal lying dormant. After the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the autumn of 2022, the Russian leadership probably did not rule out the possibility of using nuclear weapons, as evidenced among other things, by the unusual public statements made by China and India on the subject at the time.⁴¹ Even if it's not a question of Russia's survival, it is an existential question for Putin that he does not suffer a clear defeat in the war. For this reason, it is tragically impossible to rule out the possibility that Putin might resort to such an ultimate measure if, for example, the threat of losing Crimea and Donbas

³⁸ Samuel Charap - Miranda Priebe: Avoiding a Long War. *Rand Study* 25 January 2023 <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2510-1.html>; „Since neither side appears to have the intention or capabilities to achieve absolute victory, the war will most likely end with some sort of negotiated outcome.”; It's Time to Bring Russia and Ukraine to the Negotiating Table. *The New York Times*, 2 November 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/02/opinion/russia-ukraine-negotiation.html>; Richard Haass - Charles Kupchan: Redefining Success in Ukraine. A New Strategy Must Balance Means and Ends, *Foreign Affairs* November 17, 2023; Ex-General Kujat: Waffenlieferungen verlängern den Krieg, führen aber nicht zum Sieg der Ukraine, *SWR* 20 February 2023 <https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/radio/ex-general-kujat-fehler-dass-es-im-ukraine-krieg-keine-verhandlungen-mehr-gibt-100.html>

³⁹ Richard Haass: The New Gang of Four. *Project Syndicate* 24 September 2024 <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-iran-north-korea-challenges-to-world-order-by-richard-haass-2024-09>; Guoguang Wu: Interpreting Xi Jinping's Shifting Strategy on the Russia-Ukraine War. *Asia Society* October 11, 2023 <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/interpreting-xi-jinpings-shifting-strategy-russia-ukraine-war>; Max Bergmann, Maria Snegovaya, Tina Dolbaia, and Nick Fenton: Collaboration for a Price: Russian Military-Technical Cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea, *CSIS Analyses* 22 May 2024 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/collaboration-price-russian-military-technical-cooperation-china-iran-and-north-korea>

⁴⁰ Zhao Huasheng Understanding China's Policy in the Russia-Ukraine War and Implications for China-US Relations, *The Diplomat* 12 November 2023 <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/understanding-chinas-policy-in-the-russia-ukraine-war-and-implications-for-china-us-relations/>

⁴¹ China's Xi warns Putin not to use nuclear arms in Ukraine, *Politico* 4 November 2022 <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-xi-jinping-warns-vladimir-putin-not-to-use-nuclear-arms-in-ukraine-olaf-scholz-germany-peace-talks/>; India's defence minister warns against nuclear weapons in call with Russian counterpart. *Reuters*, 26 October 2022 <https://www.reuters.com/world/indias-defence-minister-warns-against-nuclear-weapons-call-with-russian-2022-10-26/>; Russian Military Leaders Discussed Use of Nuclear Weapons, U.S. Officials Say. *The New York Times*, 2 November 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/02/us/politics/russia-ukraine-nuclear-weapons.html>

loomed - although this is unlikely at present - or if the use of Western weapons against targets inside Russia reached a certain level.

Similarly, it seemed a high-risk strategy for the West to pin its hopes on an internal overthrow of the Putin regime as an inevitable consequence of the growing war burden on Russian society alongside sufficient Western sanctions and military support. Although an internal revolution can never be ruled out in the case of Russia, its likelihood has remained very low.

According to the Ukrainian-Western narrative, since February 2022 there have been two options: a Ukrainian victory based on stronger Western military support in line with the strategy pursued since then (without the participation of NATO troops) or, in the absence of this, a Ukrainian collapse. The real dilemma, however, has always been whether the West would risk a full-scale war with Russia through direct military involvement for the sake of a Ukrainian victory, or whether, painful for the West and especially for Ukraine, it would move towards a compromise that would take account of political realities and, incidentally, put an end to the slaughter and destruction caused by the war.

It is important to point out one of the central contradictions of the Western-Ukrainian strategy. On the one hand, the proponents of the strategy emphasise that Russia's military capabilities are at their limit - most recently evidenced by the presence of North Korean soldiers - and that neither its military industry nor its economy is strong enough to sustain the war in the long term. Therefore, more Western military support would bring a decisive positive change to the front lines. On the other hand, according to the same narrative, even a frozen conflict along the current front lines would pose an immediate and direct threat to the territorial integrity and security of Eastern European NATO members. But either Russia poses such an extraordinary direct military threat, or it is a weakened power on the verge of military and political collapse. Since February 2022, every relevant factor suggests that the reality lies somewhere between these two extremes. It also follows that since the beginning of the full-scale war, time has not been on Ukraine's side.

Credible deterrence and willingness to compromise go hand in hand

According to the current Western-Ukrainian strategy and perceptions about deterrence, any further Russian aggression threatening Ukraine or other Eastern European countries can only be prevented by continuing the war and Ukraine and by winning on the battlefield. Open-ended Western military support, therefore, serves to deter Russian escalation. However, credible deterrence against a nuclear power Russia's

size cannot be solely based on maximalist military and political objectives. Credible deterrence is also based on the principles of the Powell Doctrine: the existence of appropriate military capabilities and the willingness to use them, vital national or allied interests, and clear achievable objectives, together with a clear willingness to bear the associated risks and costs.⁴² Western policy towards Ukraine since 2008 clearly shows how weakly or haphazardly the elements of the Powell Doctrine have been applied. With the exception of military strength, these principles are much more applicable to the geopolitical characteristics of Eastern European NATO members than to Ukraine. However, if NATO had tried to apply these principles to Ukraine, it would only have led to a military confrontation due to Russian security perceptions.

Furthermore, the credibility of Western deterrence is actually weakened by the current strategy. On the one hand, it articulates political goals that were highly unrealistic from the outset and adds the promise of support "for as long as it takes". On the other hand, the Western strategy comes at a cost in terms of Western military potential and deterrence. The military equipment provided to Ukraine is missing from Western armies. Moreover, due to various restrictions on the use of the military equipment provided, these are operated on the Ukrainian battlefields with less efficiency than if it were used by Western forces, because of technical-technological and capability deficiencies.⁴³ At the same time, without these caveats, a direct military confrontation between NATO and Russia would have been much more likely. Ultimately, it is not only the credibility of the deterrence power of the Russian military that has been weakened, but also the deterrence power of the West. Of course, Russian assessments of NATO's military strength aren't based solely on the performance of Western military equipment on Ukrainian battlefields. However, Russia's experience on the Ukrainian battlefield may lead it to underestimate Western capabilities in some areas, thus undermining the credibility of NATO's deterrence.

Conclusions

The two fundamental conditions for achieving a ceasefire and ending the war, apart from the willingness to negotiate, are the *willingness to compromise* and the *establishment of deterrence*. As we have argued, the two are closely linked. While undoubtedly painful for Ukraine and far from ideal for the West, a compromise along the lines outlined in the Istanbul negotiations of 2022 could be achieved, taking into

⁴² Doug Bandow: Resurrect the Powell Doctrine. *Cato Commentary* October 28, 2021, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/resurrect-powell-doctrine>

⁴³ These include technical errors committed by the Ukrainian army, application restrictions on certain weapons, and the inability of the Ukrainian armed forces to conduct joint force operations due to capability shortfalls.

account political and battlefield realities. This would include more robust security guarantees for Ukraine than the Budapest Memorandum, without offering NATO membership in the foreseeable future. The United States is indispensable in realising such a Western strategy. At present, the incoming Trump administration represents the world's greatest opportunity to move towards a ceasefire in Ukraine. For Ukraine, based on current realities, the most important long-term goal should be - to quote Stephen Kotkin – not to seek to win the war at all costs but to win the peace.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Trump and the Future of American Power: A Conversation with Stephen Kotkin. *Foreign Affairs* November 7, 2024 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trump-and-future-american-power-stephen-kotkin>