

# The Russia – Ukraine War and the European Security Order

Muhammed Lutfi Türkcan



(Leon Klein - Anadolu Agency)

**This policy outlook examines the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine with a focus on the structural factors serving as enablers for Russia and its implications on the future of European security architecture. With the recent aggression, the prospect of continued peace and stability in Europe has been dramatically altered. The European security order, which has been primarily grounded upon NATO and the EU, has been seriously challenged by Russia, risking a return to an era marked by geopolitical contestations, sphere of influence politics and great power competition in Europe. As Russia continues its assault on Ukraine, the initial disunity within NATO and the West now appears to be replaced by coordinated actions as Western countries have collectively agreed to impose severe sanctions on Russia. Yet, how long European leaders will be willing to bear the cost of countering Russia and what the reactions and feelings of European citizens to the rising economic consequences of the sanctions and the war will be in the medium and long run might become the determining factor for the maintenance of the unity within NATO and the EU and future of the European security order.**

## Introduction

Russia launched a major military assault on Ukraine after Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a February 24<sup>th</sup> televised speech, [stated](#) that he had approved a “special military operation”. Putin [said](#) that the attack was being undertaken in order to “demilitarize and denazify Ukraine”, [adding](#) that “Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist with a constant threat emanating from the territory of modern Ukraine.” Ukrainian forces have thus far [stood](#) defiant and have repulsed a series of attacks. [According](#) to the UN, over one hundred civilians have been killed, and an estimated one million Ukrainians have fled to neighbouring countries since the invasion began. At the time of writing, Russian troops had be-sieged the capital Kyiv and Russian artillery and rockets continue to hit Ukrainian targets.

The prospect for a Russian invasion of Ukraine had become more probable after Putin [announced](#) the recognition of two separatist regions of Ukraine - Donetsk and Luhansk - as independent republics and signed a decree to send Russian troops to the east of Ukraine stating that they would perform “peacekeeping” functions. Although the threat of sanctions failed to prevent Russia from launching an invasion, the West has since followed through its pledges and imposed severe sanctions on Russian banks, financial institutions, and individuals. Accordingly, several Russian banks have been [excluded](#) from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) system in an attempt to isolate Russia from the international financial system. Additionally, the EU, Canada and the US have [closed](#) their airspace to Russian planes while the EU pledged to send weapons and other military supplies to Ukraine. These are in addition to Germany’s decision to [halt](#) approval of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project.

Since the last December, Russia had been engaged in a massive military build-up near the Ukrainian border, raising concerns of a possible military operation. In December, Russia had also [issued](#) a list of demands to the US saying that these must be met in order to lower the tension and stave off a military conflict in Ukraine. The list had included a ban on Ukraine’s entry into NATO, a limit NATO’s military deployments near Russian borders and removal of the NATO forces deployed in the countries that joined the alliance after 1997. NATO found the demands unacceptable, stating that Russia does not have veto power over who gets to join the alliance. Subsequent diplomatic talks and efforts ultimately yielded no solutions and Russia’s launched its military offensive on February 24<sup>th</sup>.

Although Russia’s ultimate objectives remain unclear, at a minimum Moscow appears to be aiming for regime change in Ukraine to replace the Zelensky government with pro-Russian figures. Although it is difficult to know how the events will unfold on the ground, it is clear that the prospect of continued peace and stability in Europe

has been dramatically altered. With the recent aggression, the European security order, which has been primarily grounded upon NATO and the EU, has been seriously challenged by Russia risking a return to an era marked by geopolitical contestations, sphere of influence politics and great power competition in Europe.

## The Russian Challenge to the Post-Cold War European Security Order

The end of the Cold War brought about a new security architecture in Europe. The Soviet Union had dissolved, and former communist countries in Eastern Europe, including Russia, had started integrating into European institutions. It was envisaged that Europe would become a Euro-Atlantic community characterized by shared values of democracy, interdependence, and multilateralism. Hence, NATO and the European Union and, to a lesser extent, the OSCE emerged as the major [institutions](#) for European security. The hopes and optimism for the future of Europe were high in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War as it was believed that the importance of hard power had dramatically decreased as a result of complex interdependence and that sphere of influence politics, which characterised the Cold War era, lost its significance. As such, the Europeans believed that Russia would accept the post-Cold War reality with the expectation that geopolitical rivalries would be replaced with collaborative efforts designed to strengthen the liberal order. Indeed, Russia took several significant steps in this direction. For instance, the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council was [established](#) in 1997, functioning at that time as a formal platform to maintain the relationship between Russia and the West, which was replaced with NATO-Russia Council in 2002. Russia also supported the US “War on Terror” campaign initiated after the 9/11 terror attacks through intelligence sharing in particular. With regards to relations with the EU, the period between 1992 and 1994 witnessed some significant developments on the way to Russian integration with the EU, culminating in the signing of the Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation in 1994, which constituted the founding principles of the future relationship.

Yet, the vision for a united and undivided Europe has never completely materialized. Russia’s initial ambition to become part of the new European order has [ebbed](#) away and Moscow never fully integrated into European institutions. In fact, by design, the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe, which has centred primarily on NATO and EU has [left](#) Russia on the side-line from the onset. In this regard, Mary Elise Sarotte [contends](#) that rather than establishing a new security order in Europe in the post-Cold War era, the West perpetuated the institutions of the Cold



Russian President Vladimir Putin summons meeting of Russia's Security Council at Kremlin in Moscow, Russia on February 21, 2022. (KREMLIN PRESS OFFICE / HANDOUT - Anadolu Agency)

War. The NATO enlargement process was arguably the most consequential as it relates to the growing tensions between Russia and the West. From the beginning, Russia demonstrated resentment towards the enlargement process. Yet, lacking economic, military, and political capacity, Moscow's efforts to counter the enlargement process remained limited to diplomatic efforts. When Ukraine and Georgia's membership in NATO [became](#) a real possibility in 2008, Russia took military actions to revert it. For some [analysts](#), this has become one of the underlying reasons for the eruption of the ongoing Ukraine crisis. In the case of Ukraine, Russia has pursued an assertive strategy towards Ukraine since the 2000s. Prior to February 2022, this had culminated with the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Since then, Russia has continued its involvement in the ongoing conflict in the Donbas region, amassing over one hundred thousand troops across the Ukrainian border since December 2021.

Although it is hard to specify which factors played the most critical role in triggering Russia's latest military moves, it appears that certain structural reasons have served as enabling factor for Russia. One has to do with the fact that Russia with its modernized military and a resilient economy in the face of the economic sanctions imposed by the West and pandemic has grown confident in recent years. Since 2008, Russia has undertaken a military [modernisation](#) process enabling Russia to project power in its neighbourhood, as seen in Georgia and Ukraine, and also abroad as in the case of Syria. Russia has also increasingly turned to private military companies, most significantly the Wagner Group, in its foreign operations becoming an influential actor in the Libya crisis. Recently, Russia has

also managed to bring Belarus and Kazakhstan into its sphere of [influence](#) by helping both countries to survive in the face of the protests through the provision of security forces and financing. Additionally, the Russian economy has demonstrated [resilience](#) to the adverse impacts of economic sanctions imposed by the West post-2014 as the country adjusted its economic outlook, particularly in the agricultural and financial sectors and developed new economic partnerships with other countries, particularly with China. While Russia has managed to reassert itself as the dominant regional power capable of projecting power regionally and globally, its military and political actions in Syria, Kazakhstan and Belarus have received only tepid responses from the West, further emboldening Moscow in pursuing its ambitions in Europe.

## A Decrease in US Influence

In addition to Russia's increasing confidence in its material capabilities and military might, another important factor that has arguably allowed for Russian aggression has to do with the changes in US grand strategy and its implications for the trans-Atlantic alliance. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has served as the main mechanism to provide security in Europe. Under the security umbrella [provided](#) by the US, European countries had the opportunity to invest in their economy and increase their wealth and prosperity. Despite the EU's several attempts and efforts to develop its own foreign and security policy within the framework of strategic autonomy, they have continued



to be dependent on the US for while Washington has continued to demonstrate both a willingness and capability to do so. Beyond the European theatre, the US was also eager to assume the global leadership role and sustain the liberal world order through political, economic, and military means. In this regard, Washington has led several military interventions in the post-Cold War era including in Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), and Libya (2011) alongside France and the UK.

However, since President Obama's second term, the US administration has revealed an apparent reluctance to maintain its self-assumed leadership role. Several factors can be included in the list of reasons behind the shift in the US grand strategy. One of them has to do with the adverse effects of US [imperial overstretch](#). It is based on the notion that as the US spends its resources to maintain world order and makes political and military commitments, others, including European countries and China, find chances to focus on economic development, thereby shifting the balance of power in their favour vis-à-vis the US. Relatedly, it is widely believed that public support for overseas military activities in the US has dramatically [decreased thanks to the economic burdens and casualties](#). Against this backdrop, with the decision to withdraw US troops from Iraq in 2008, the US signalled that its commitment to global affairs would be diminished. This was most evident during the Syria crisis where, despite the fact the Obama administration drew a clear [red line](#) for the Assad regime that the use of chemical weapons would be responded to with military action, Washington ultimately did not follow through its threat. Significantly, arguably [changed](#) the trajectory of events in the country, paving the way for Russia to become an influential actor in the region. Russia's show of force has also facilitated Moscow's development of close ties with traditional US partners in the region including Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. This does not suggest that the US

has completely withdrawn from its global ambitions and interests, yet the way it pursues these interests has dramatically changed in a way in which costly military operations have been replaced with more selective military engagements and economic statecraft. The US' decreasing global influence during this period has started to cast amongst US allies and partners about the extent to which it would be willing to go vis-à-vis its security guarantees.

President Trump only exacerbated these worries as the credibility of the US security assurances dramatically decreased during his term thanks to his largely negative attitude towards multilateralism, international institutions, and NATO in particular. Trump repeatedly questioned the value of NATO, describing it as a Cold War relic and [claiming](#) that it was "obsolete". European members of the alliance also faced severe criticisms from Trump for not meeting the minimum level of defence spending. Trump also [accused](#) European allies of 'free-riding', stating that the US is paying too much money to protect Europe. Trump even suggested that the US would reduce the number of US troops stationed in Germany, should it continue to not pay its share. These are in addition to Trump's questioning of the very foundation of NATO's mutual defence clause of Article 5. Amidst rising tension within the alliance, in 2019 French President Macron [called](#) NATO "brain dead", noting that the Europeans could no longer rely on the US for their security. During this period, the idea of European strategic autonomy once again gained popularity and European leaders sought ways to develop a common security policy. In this direction, the EU has [accelerated](#) measures to upgrade its defence capabilities such as investing in common industrial and research projects, increasing information sharing among member states in the development of defence capabilities, enhancing joint defence investments and generating a fund for collaborative defence initiatives.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen hold a news conference at NATO headquarters, after their meeting on Russia's military intervention in Ukraine (Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

The Biden administration came to power with a specific intention to [restore](#) its ties with US allies and partners and rebuild US credibility. Yet, despite the efforts, several developments have led to the continuation of divisions within the alliance. Firstly, just as the Trump administration, the Biden administration also [described](#) China as a strategic rival and stated that the Indo-Pacific would be the central focus of the US foreign policy. This has suggested that the US commitments in Europe will have secondary importance given the increasing threat perceptions from China, making security partnerships with the Asian countries much more critical for Washington. Secondly, the Biden administration's [withdrawal](#) from Afghanistan without consulting with the Europeans has further increased the worries of the US partners and allies. Thirdly, the creation of an enhanced trilateral security partnership between the US, UK and Australia, popularly known as AUKUS, last year only [exacerbated](#) the rift within the alliance. The signing of the AUKUS deal angered France given that the country has lost a \$66bn contract with Australia for the building of diesel-powered submarines. Additionally, France was notified about the deal mere hours before its signing causing a sense of humiliation in Paris. Hence, the French foreign minister described the deal as a "stab in the back" and Paris recalled its ambassadors from both Washington and Canberra. Although the Biden administration has put great efforts to assuage France concerns, the deal became another factor causing tension within the alliance. Hence, it can be argued that the ongoing crisis within NATO and the US decreasing global influence coupled with Russia's growing confidence made it possible for Russia to resort to an all-out military assault.

## Implication for the Future of the European Security Order

Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 has been a major hit to the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe. The recent Russian aggression is arguably the most serious threat to the European security order since the end of the Cold War. It is not clear what will replace the post-Cold War order in Europe, however, Europe risks becoming a theatre for geopolitical rivalry and economic warfare with an increased possibility of instability and risk of military contestations. Hence, the relatively peaceful period for Europe bereft of great power confrontation for three decades could be replaced with one characterized by zero-sum mentality, sphere of influence politics and competing security interests.

NATO, the main security provider of the continent, arguably displayed a lack of harmony in the initial phase of the crisis as member states differed in their assessment of the situation and opted for divergent policy preferences on how to best respond to Russia's military threat. Germany

was one of the countries that demonstrated an evident reluctance to use forceful actions to counter Russia's aggression as Berlin [ruled](#) out the export of arms to Ukraine under the pretext that Germany does not provide weapons of war to conflict zones as a matter of principle. Additionally, Berlin reportedly blocked Estonia from sending German-made weapons to Ukraine and [banned](#) the transit of weapons from the UK through its airspace. Germany, also, showed hesitancy regarding including the Nord Stream 2 project as part of possible sanctions package against Russia. These developments increased concerns that Russia could use the German hesitation to drive a [wedge](#) within NATO.

As Russia continues its assault on Ukraine, the initial disunity within NATO and the West now appears to be replaced by coordinated actions as Western countries have collectively agreed to impose severe sanctions on Russia. In this regard, certain Russian banks have been [excluded](#) from the SWIFT international payment system, which will significantly damage their ability to operate globally. This was one of the most debated sanctions prior to the invasion. Additional steps are also being taken to prevent the Central Bank of Russia from using its oversea reserves to buttress Russia's economy. Although Russia has de-dollarized its reserves to a certain extent since 2014, around 50% of its assets are constituted by USD, Euros, and Sterling (GBP). Moreover, they are housed in Western countries including France, Japan, Germany, US, and UK. Hence, [half](#) of Russia's \$643 billion reserves will, in theory, not be accessible. Moreover, the EU has [closed](#) its airspace to Russian planes and effectively [banned](#) Russian media outlets Sputnik and Russia Today (RT). In a major shift, Germany has recently stepped up its involvement by, first, [halting](#) the certification of the NordStream 2 project and then announcing that they will directly [send](#) weapons and other supplies to Ukraine including 1,000 anti-tank weapons and 500 Stinger missiles. In a similar vein, the EU also [announced](#) that they will finance \$500 million worth of weapons and deliver them to Ukraine in a historic move that marks the first of its kind in its history. Hence, some [analysts](#) have contended that the Russian threat has served to contribute to the revival of NATO whose relevancy in the rapidly shifting international system had become widely debated in recent years. As such, the recent crisis has arguably [strengthened](#) the NATO through the emergence of the most serious threat to European security since the end of the Cold War. It is also assumed that the alliance will now return to its core and main function: to contain Russian aggression in Europe, the reason it was established in the first place.

However, certain issues remain critical for the prospect of the security and stability of the region. One of them has a lot to do with the possibility of a [prolonged](#) conflict where Russia continues its military pressure on Ukraine for an extended period of time. This might entail the West engaging in economic attrition to the point of Russia's economic defeat. The sanctions imposed thus far are expected to



*A Ukrainian soldier is seen in Zhuliany neighborhood of Kyiv during Russia's military intervention in Ukraine.  
(Aytaç Ünal - Anadolu Agency)*

serve two functions. Firstly, the economic pain induced by sanctions will be intensified over time, causing a domestic backlash. Having declining living standards, Russian citizens will likely continue to [become](#) more vocal in expressing their opposition to Putin. This will be coupled with the defection of Russian elites and oligarchs whose interests are damaged thanks to the sanctions, theoretically paving way for Putin's ouster. Secondly, even if sanctions do not lead Putin's demise, they will [weaken](#) Russia in the long run in its competition with the West and reduce the resources available to be used in foreign policy activism. Hence, although sanctions are not likely to bring about a change in Russia's behaviour in the short term, their impact will become more evident in the medium or long run. However, while sanctions will have enormous [impacts](#) on the Russian economy including high inflation, slower growth, and weaker Ruble, this will come at the expense of economic [costs](#) to the sanctioning countries at a time when these countries are struggling the effects of the pandemic, slow economic growth and the highest inflation. Additionally, Europe is highly [dependent](#) on Russian gas and oil. One-third of Europe's gas supplies and one-quarter of oil supplies flow from Russia. Although the West has so far avoided directly targeting Russia's energy sector, Moscow [announced](#) that it will take retaliatory measures in response to Western sanctions, raising the possibility of a partial or complete cutting off of Russian energy supplies to Europe. Notwithstanding the fact that this move would have significant impacts on Russian economy, if this happens, it will also severely hit European economy as higher energy prices will further increase already strong inflationary pressures and lower real household income. Additionally, contrary to the expectations of many, sanctions might increase Putin's support among the Russian citizens if the Kremlin manages to portray the economic hardship resulting from the sanctions as part of the Western encroach-

ment by appealing to nationalist sentiments, which was the case when support for Putin increased after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. This might further contribute to Putin's ambitions in Europe thereby prolonging the conflict or expanding it to other countries. Moreover, in a prolonged confrontation, the refugee crisis might become worse and a point of divergence among the European countries, paving the way for populist propaganda. Given these circumstances, how long European leaders will be eager to bear the cost of countering Russia and what the reactions and feelings of European citizens will be in the medium and long run might become the determining factor for the maintenance of the unity within NATO and the EU.

Additionally, the current Russian aggression has also demonstrated that penalizing Russia with sanctions and condemnations might not be sufficient to provide stability and peace in the region as it has become clear that the threat of sanctions which were dubbed as "swift and severe" failed in deterring Russia, casting doubts about NATO and EU's ability to provide security and stability before the aggression took place. Given the remote possibility of a change in Russian foreign policy under Putin despite the sanctions, lacking deterrent tools against Russia other than punitive sanctions, the West could have a hard time preventing Russia if the latter intends to target other European countries through hybrid methods. Hence, regardless of the outcome of the ongoing aggression, the Russian attack has already increased the insecurity and uncertainty in the region. This might trigger European countries to increase their defence spending and lead to a wave of militarization in the region. Germany's [announcement](#) to increase its defence spending to more than 2% of its GDP might be considered as an indication of the shifting policy priorities in European countries.