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# The Ukraine War & European Security: How Durable is America's Strategy?

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# Executive Summary

More than a year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the morale of the United States and its Western allies appears high.<sup>1</sup> Spurred into action by Moscow's act of aggression, NATO appears more united, the EU has seemingly become more of a geopolitical actor, and Ukraine has resisted and repulsed the Russian onslaught to a degree that few initially thought possible. The Biden administration has thus far laudably managed to ramp up assistance to Kyiv without directly confronting Moscow.

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However, while the current U.S. policy toward Russia and Ukraine may be sustainable for some time, that does not mean it will never run out of road. Sanctions against Russia – a major global economy – have been ramped up to a level previously unseen, but they have not been effective in compelling Moscow to change course. The United States and its allies have yet to agree on what they deem to be an acceptable endgame to the war. Great power or not, Russia will remain a populous, powerful and potentially disruptive actor in Europe. Without clearly and credibly proposing policies that can lower the temperature, and without beginning to envisage what a future European security order might look like, the United States risks prolonging the conflict – with potentially unforeseeable consequences if popular war-weariness continues to grow.

Alongside continued support for Ukraine, carefully crafted diplomatic proposals can make the outcome of the war more predictable, lower the risk of escalation, and stabilize the U.S.–Russia rivalry. While a window for pursuing them may not emerge

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Jan Lepeu, Sarang Shidore, and Anatol Lieven for their comments on earlier versions of this Brief.

until later this year, the time to begin preparations is now. Specifically, the Biden administration should:

- Signal its openness to revitalizing the principle of indivisible security in the Euro–Atlantic area, to ensure that the security concerns of all regional actors are given a fair hearing.
- Coordinate with allies to communicate proposals for sanctions relief in exchange for a phased disengagement of Russian forces following a ceasefire, which would result in a longer–term political process to resolve Ukraine’s territorial integrity while creating the space necessary to focus on discussing security guarantees for all parties.
- Build trust by developing ad hoc proposals for arms control on the continent, to counterbalance the current dynamic of ramping up military–industrial production for an era of renewed interstate war in Europe.

## Introduction

One year ago, the United States and its European allies came together to implement coordinated and far–reaching sanctions in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The story that the United States has been able to tell itself since then has largely been a positive one. NATO has rediscovered its purpose after decades of post–Cold War uncertainty over its role in a changed international environment. In March, Washington’s allies and partners in the EU adopted their Strategic Compass, representing the first collective threat assessment undertaken by the organization’s member states. In June, a milestone event occurred with the offering of EU candidate country status to Ukraine and Moldova – something that would not have occurred if not for the war. And last autumn, thanks to growing Western military assistance, Ukrainian forces launched a successful counteroffensive against the Russian military and recaptured Kherson.

But one year later, the persistent question is how long can the United States sustain this strategy. The current course appears sturdy enough to withstand pressure for some

time in at least three respects – imposing economic sanctions, defining an acceptable endgame, and resolving outstanding questions of pan-European security – but it could at some point run out of road. Together, these obstacles suggest that an opportunity to introduce more de-escalatory dynamics into the conflict could and should be found before the end of 2023 – if the United States chooses to act upon it.

## The perils of prediction

Some of the factors shaping the sustainability of the U.S. approach to Ukraine rely on events that are perilously difficult to predict. The outcome of a war relies not only on the balance of forces, weaponry, and strategy but also on more intangible factors such as momentum and resolve. It could be that Ukraine has already acquired “irreversible momentum,” as retired U.S. General Ben Hodges asserts.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, Russia’s partial military mobilization may help to impede substantial further Ukrainian gains and eventually lay the groundwork for a reversal of fortunes.

The domestic situation for all involved parties is also difficult to predict. No-one can say if or when a tipping point in popular support for current U.S. policy might be reached. Such a tipping point could be the result of “Ukraine fatigue,” or it could arrive due to more pressing geopolitical challenges emerging in other theaters. Recent trends indicate that Americans are increasingly divided on the war, with bipartisan support among voters having clearly eroded since the war’s start.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Russia, one could point to the mounting costs of the war in terms of military losses and economic damage and therefore imagine that support for Putin may crumble – if not in the wider population than at least within the elite. But again,

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<sup>2</sup> Olga Rudenko, “Retired US General Ben Hodges: ‘We’ve reached irreversible momentum for Ukraine,’” *The Kyiv Independent*, September 19, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/retired-us-general-if-russia-used-nuclear-weapon-in-ukraine-us-would-have-to-get-directly-involved>.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce W. Jentleson, “American Consensus on Ukraine Has Fractured,” *Foreign Policy*, March 29, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/29/ukraine-support-us-republicans-democrats-politics/>; Amina Dunn, “As Russian invasion nears one-year mark, partisans grow further apart on U.S. support for Ukraine.” Pew Research Center, January 31, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/01/31/as-russian-invasion-nears-one-year-mark-partisans-grow-further-apart-on-u-s-support-for-ukraine/>.

pinpointing or calculating when this may occur is extremely difficult. In the summer of 1991 the complete collapse of the Soviet Union into its 15 constituent republics within a few months was not seen as the most probable outcome. Today, the situation could also change rapidly: Putin may be gone by this time next year – or he may remain entrenched in power for many years to come.

The difficulty of making predictions favors the continuation of a dynamic in relations between Russia and the West that has been in play for many years: Namely, that each side believes time is on its side and underestimates the potential resilience of the other. Even if it did not create this dynamic, the war has only served to buttress it. Many in the West have become deeply convinced that there can be no cooperative security order in Europe so long as Putin remains in the Kremlin, just as Putin has clearly articulated that he views the supranational and decadent West as doomed to fail due to its supposed political and cultural abnormalities.<sup>4</sup>

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Placing one's hopes in regime change in Russia as a panacea is a highly uncertain bet. While some in the West fantasize about Putin's demise or even the collapse of Russia itself, the most likely scenario is that Russia will continue to exist either ruled by Putin or by an intra-regime successor – one whose room for maneuver will be constrained by domestic political factors or, worse, who may be more naturally predisposed to embracing nationalism and revanchism than Putin.

But the Kremlin cannot automatically assume that it can simply outwait the United States. A new occupant of the White House may seek to change course, pivoting away from Europe's problems and focusing on the challenge of a rising China instead. This would especially be the case if a prolonged war that drags on into 2024 becomes a political issue in the next presidential election. However, a change in the incumbent

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<sup>4</sup> President of Russia, "Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia," September 30, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/29>.

president will not necessarily produce a sea change in U.S. policy, given the various disagreements between Washington and Moscow that existed during the Trump administration on issues such as the INF Treaty and Syria.

The United States has fought several lengthy wars in recent history, including in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. While the cumulative fatigue that these wars have engendered may favor a more restrained U.S. foreign policy overall, U.S. forces are not directly fighting in Ukraine nor has the U.S. economy taken the greatest hit in this war. This suggests that Washington may still have a non-negligible runway to maintain its current posture.<sup>5</sup> And given that U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War period has been geared toward a form of global primacy (i.e., retaining Washington's status as the pre-eminent power in every major geo-strategic theater on the planet), it is more likely that an "America first" president would seek to exploit Europe's growing dependence on the United States rather than abandon it to pursue a more complete pivot to Asia. Together, these facts suggest that the U.S. strategy is considerably resilient – and will likely remain so if it stays focused on developments on the battlefield and shaping Russia's foreign policy choices, rather than on determining events within Russia itself.

That said, three specific weaknesses linger in the U.S. approach toward Russia, each of which threatens to manifest itself more clearly – and more dangerously – as the war drags on. These concern the ability of the Western sanctions regime to shape Russia's actions, the challenge of producing a suitable endgame on the battlefield, and the difficulty of finding a place for Moscow in the continental security fabric after the war.

While these three trends will not immediately affect Washington's capacity to maintain its current course, they nonetheless risk a dangerous escalation of the conflict in the worst-case scenario. At best, they will render it more difficult to construct something approaching a stable European security order once the dust settles on this war. A perennially unstable Europe threatens U.S. freedom of maneuver over the longer term when it comes to crafting a nimble grand strategy, therefore making it less likely that

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<sup>5</sup> Raphael S. Cohen, "The Myth of America's Ukraine Fatigue," *Foreign Policy*, January 2, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/02/ukraine-russia-war-fatigue-myth-us-public-opinion/>.

Western actions in Ukraine are serving to deter not just Russia today but also China tomorrow.

## Sanctions – to what end?

The first issue concerns the logic underpinning the Western sanctions campaign against Russia.

The initial rounds of sanctions imposed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine went further than many expected, even targeting Russia's central bank. Putin likely expected that a quick victory in Ukraine, when paired with expert economic management at home and the risk-averseness of a dependent German economy, would spare Russia the bulk of any economic pain.

Putin's war did not go according to plan and Western countries demonstrated greater unity and resolve than some observers expected. As a result, the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian economy and war machine has been significant. As Russia burns through its stocks of weapons, export bans on semiconductors and dual use goods have at least partly weakened the Russian industrial effort to support its troops, which has a direct impact on the state of play on the battlefield.<sup>6</sup> Irrespective of Russia's ability to ramp up production and put its economy on a war footing, one can presume that acquiring Iranian drones or North Korean ammunition was not at the top of the wish list of a presumed great power at the beginning of this war.

That said, despite their growing strength throughout the war's duration, Western restrictive measures have ultimately failed to change Russia's foreign policy behavior or discourage Moscow from continuing to pursue its military objectives in Ukraine, as has indeed been the case since Russia's initial intervention in 2014. And while the sanctions are undoubtedly a burden on the Russian state budget – and therefore may force the regime to cut back on popular social policies – they have not been the economic

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<sup>6</sup> "Chip exports to Russia plunged by 90% after curbs-U.S. official," Reuters, June 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/chip-exports-russia-plunged-by-90-after-curbs-us-official-2022-06-29/>.

doomsday scenario that many predicted, with the Russian economy having only contracted by around only 3 or 4 percent in 2022.<sup>7</sup>

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An approach rooted in sticks but not carrots has ultimately reduced Washington's leverage, irrespective of the impressive level of allied coordination and unity on display. Once imposed, sanctions can be extremely hard to lift – one need only look at Congress's Jackson–Vanik amendment, which was passed in 1974 and remained on the books until 2012 despite Russia's post–Soviet political transition.

Clearly articulating the conditions under which sanctions will be lifted (for example, if Russia fulfills certain conditions in the context of a negotiated settlement) is key to their effectiveness. As such, rather than constrain Putin's options, the way in which the sanctions campaign has been pursued has encouraged Russia to escalate the conflict. In the current political climate, it is difficult to imagine that those advocating for a reduction of the maximum pressure campaign will enjoy much success. This is true not only in the United States, but also in Europe: While it only takes one EU member state to veto the renewal of sanctions, Eurosceptic governments such as Hungary's appear more interested in using the mere threat of a veto to ensure their continued access to EU structural funds.<sup>8</sup> The current absence of a realistic offramp for the sanctions

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Marrow, "Russia's more gradual economic contraction to extend into 2023," Reuters, December 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/russias-more-gradual-economic-contraction-extend-into-2023-2022-12-02/>; European Council/Council of the European Union. "Infographic - Impact of sanctions on the Russian economy," <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/impact-sanctions-russian-economy/>.

<sup>8</sup> Kadri Liik, "The old is dying and the new cannot be born: A power audit of EU-Russia relations," European Council on Foreign Relations, December 14, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-old-is-dying-and-the-new-cannot-be-born-a-power-audit-of-eu-russia-relations/>.



campaign will undoubtedly complicate efforts, however gradual, to build a new European security order after the war.

Moreover, irrespective of whether sanctions will succeed in weakening Russia's economy and military capabilities over the medium-to-long term, they do little to address the dangerous and unpredictable escalation ladder that is playing out right now. For example, in reaction to battlefield losses, Russia may resort to employing capabilities that have thus far remained on the sidelines, making life more difficult for Ukraine and perhaps even targeting or interdicting U.S. and allied assets. Given that sanctions take several months or even years for their full effect to be felt, a strategy that privileged costs imposition over more active support for a diplomatic offramp in the war's early months contributed to a logic favoring a prolonged standoff.

If the sanctions have failed to deter Russian aggression and their most important effects will not be felt for some time, then it is hard to avoid the inference that one of their most immediate aims has been to destabilize Russia's elite system – if not the Russian regime itself. The latter option evidently presents a significant (albeit unknowable) escalation risk, given the existential stakes for Putin. Sanctioning Russia's elite, for its part, is not a panacea. The common Western refrain that Russia is a kleptocracy – a “gas station masquerading as a country,” to quote the late U.S. Senator John McCain – lends itself to a belief that sanctioning its economic elite will cause Putin to come under immense pressure and change his foreign policy behavior.<sup>9</sup> The logic of this is patently absurd: It beggars belief that Russia would withdraw its forces from Ukraine and fundamentally alter its geostrategic aims simply because of restrictions imposed on a handful of rich men.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, political power in Russia is not primarily vested in businessmen. The influence of the latter group was deliberately reduced – though their economic power remained intact – as a means of stabilizing Russia's political scene

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<sup>9</sup> Burgess Everett, “McCain: Russia is a ‘gas station,’” *Politico*, March 26, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/john-mccain-russia-gas-station-105061>.

<sup>10</sup> “Can Western sanctions deter a Russian invasion of Ukraine?” CEPS Think Tank, February 23, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjFEKq7wSds>.

after the chaotic 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Cutting off their access to the West makes them more dependent on the Kremlin, especially as they compete over assets left by the Western withdrawal from the Russian market.

Initial hopes that the Russian war effort would prove massively unpopular at home have largely been dashed, despite the persistence of various pockets of discontent. A long military slog in Ukraine, combined with the perception that the Russian people were unjustly targeted over military actions for which they were not responsible, has created the conditions under which the regime can foster a “rally around the flag” effect.

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Even if they have occasionally produced policy successes like the JCPOA, massive sanctions and isolation campaigns have not induced political change in Iran, North Korea, Venezuela and Cuba; this makes it difficult to see how sanctions could affect profound change in Russia. Much like Russia, these states that have been targeted by sanctions in recent years have shown their willingness to absorb the costs in pursuit of what they view as core interests. While efforts can still be undertaken to maximize the impact of existing sanctions, at least one core aspect of the U.S. (and Western) approach towards Russia may have reached the limit of its effectiveness, especially in its ability to shape Russia’s perceptions and actions. One can only sanction one’s opponent so much – and once the low-hanging fruit has been grasped, additional measures can have diminishing returns.

The various measures that now exist to navigate sanctions-proof channels, when combined with the personal stake that Putin has invested in this war, suggest that

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<sup>11</sup> Greg Rosalsky, “How Putin Conquered Russia’s Oligarchy,” NPR, March 29, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2022/03/29/1088886554/how-putin-conquered-russias-oligarchy>.

sanctions have limits when it comes to compelling adversaries.<sup>12</sup> This raises the question of what endgame to the war these sanctions are aimed at facilitating.

## Defining victory

Officially, the U.S. position is to support Ukraine for “as long as it takes” – effectively outsourcing the decision on when fighting should stop to Kyiv.<sup>13</sup> The phrase “as long as it takes” is evidently vague, papering over the extent to which U.S. and Ukrainian interests may diverge. Yet while Washington may be willing to calibrate the level of assistance it provides to Kyiv going forward, it has not yet shown a desire to envisage an end date for hostilities.<sup>14</sup>

Ukraine is understandably worried that Russia will be emboldened by any territorial concessions. A ceasefire certainly would not imply that the political relationship between Russia and Ukraine has been resolved, but there is a risk, however low, that if Russia experienced a significant military setback Putin would escalate the conflict even further, possibly even using non-conventional weapons. Such an act would likely force the United States and its allies to respond in some fashion, whether through a massive cyberattack or a direct conventional strike on Russian forces, as a renewed round of sanctions would evidently prove insufficient. A direct NATO–Russia confrontation would likely ensue – something the United States currently seeks to avoid.

While Ukraine evidently wants as much Western support as possible to restore its territorial integrity and strengthen its position for future negotiations, the United States and its allies have their own security to worry about as well. A Russian victory in this war, however defined, would certainly imperil the established norms of the European security order. But an unambiguous Ukrainian victory also comes with security risks. A

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<sup>12</sup> Agathe Demarais, “The End of the Age of Sanctions?” *Foreign Affairs*, December 27, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/end-age-sanctions>.

<sup>13</sup> Lorne Cooke, “NATO vows to aid Ukraine ‘for as long as it takes,’” Associated Press, November 25, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-nato-europe-romania-jens-stoltenberg-2c7bdd0c43589c8d9453e0efc327b368>.

<sup>14</sup> Yasmeen Abutaleb and John Hudson, “U.S. Warns Ukraine It Faces a Pivotal Moment in War,” *Washington Post*, February 12, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/02/13/us-ukraine-war-critical-moment/>.

prolonged conflict, for its part, risks embroiling Washington in a two–front military conflict if U.S.–China relations continue to deteriorate.

The United States has not articulated a precise endgame to date, permitting it to retain a degree of flexibility as conditions shift on the battlefield. This has allowed Washington to increase pressure against Moscow as much as it deems safe and necessary. However, this lack of clarity can also be problematic. Buoyed by Ukraine’s initial successes in resisting the Russian onslaught, the Biden administration has framed this conflict in maximalist terms, claiming that not just Ukrainian sovereignty but the “rules-based international order” writ large is at stake.<sup>15</sup> The logical inference is that anything short of liberating all sovereign Ukrainian territory – or, at the very least, all territory held prior to February 24, 2022 – would represent an unacceptable defeat.

Setting aside terms such as the “rules–based international order,” which can be deliberately opaque, the reality is that several distinct norms are being litigated at present.<sup>16</sup> These include Ukraine’s sovereignty, its territorial integrity and its right to national self–determination (some may interpret the latter to include aspiring to join Western bodies such as NATO and the EU).

Perhaps this war could not have been averted, given Putin’s obsession with Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> But any theoretical deal that Moscow and Western capitals could have agreed on to avert the war would have preserved Ukraine’s sovereignty while limiting its ability to join Western institutions (its territorial integrity would have remained intact save for Crimea and the eastern Donbas). Ukraine won the fight for its sovereignty in the early weeks of Russia’s full–scale invasion. That said, more of its territorial integrity has been compromised and its accession to NATO appears unlikely for the foreseeable future. And although Ukraine has been accorded EU candidate country status, full membership remains years if not decades away.

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr., “President Biden: What America Will and Will Not Do in Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Beinart, “The Vacuous Phrase at the Core of Biden’s Foreign Policy,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/22/opinion/biden-foreign-policy.html>.

<sup>17</sup> President of Russia, “Article by Vladimir Putin ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,’” July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

If Ukraine cannot retake all its territory by force, perhaps victory for Ukraine should be viewed not in territorial terms, but rather with respect to whether it can survive as a sovereign and viable state, capable of charting a path toward a “European” future. Although not a perfect parallel given the different geopolitical situation across Europe at the time, Finland retained its sovereignty after World War Two and became a prosperous democracy well-positioned to join the EU, despite having been forced to cede territory to the USSR. Developing a high standard of living and democratic governance were the critical factors that positioned Helsinki to join the Western community, which suggests that for Kyiv the more significant struggle is to secure the rule of law, foster functional state institutions and pursue key reforms rather than winning back all territory. These essential tasks will become more difficult the longer the war persists.

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Today, there is little basis for a negotiated settlement. Russia continues to insist on Ukrainian capitulation to its (admittedly amorphous and shifting) demands, while Ukraine believes it can retake all its territory militarily. Each believes the other’s position will eventually be threatened due to sheer exhaustion of manpower, resources or political will – and that time is therefore on their side. However, if it becomes clear that neither will prove able to realize its political and military aims in full, Ukraine’s territorial integrity might have to be resolved through a deferred political process.<sup>18</sup> If the current pace of events fails to deliver the desired results for either side, and neither party is prepared to accept a stalemate due to the existential rhetoric present on all sides, then a dangerous and perhaps uncontrollable escalation ladder may lie ahead. This would not only risk the security of the United States and its European allies, but also complicate

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<sup>18</sup> Zachary Paikin, “Russia’s War on Ukraine: Two Inconvenient Truths for the EU,” JOINT, November 2022, <https://www.jointproject.eu/2022/11/28/russias-war-on-ukraine-two-inconvenient-truths-for-the-eu/>.

efforts to stabilize the situation to a point where a new European security order can be gradually – if imperfectly – built.

In terms of the global dimension of the conflict, victory is also not assured for the West. In fact, the West’s response to the war may perversely reduce global support for the “rules-based order” it claims to defend. This goes beyond non-Western states resenting the framing of Western concerns as universal when the same courtesy is not extended to them.<sup>19</sup> Powers such as China, who fear they may become the next victims of Western sanctions, may not be deterred from pursuing their core strategic objectives (e.g., reunification with Taiwan), but rather could be encouraged to steel themselves against coercive methods and “sanction-proof” their economies, while sitting back and watching Western weapons stockpiles deplete as military assistance to Ukraine continues.<sup>20</sup> The seizure of the private assets of Russian citizens, while perhaps morally justified, may also lead some to question the impartiality of the Western legal system.

Framing the war as an all-out struggle between democracy and authoritarianism (rather than a contingent effort to defend a country’s sovereignty) has encouraged many countries in the Global South to remain on the sidelines, while also fostering a Western attitude insufficiently focused on the war’s deleterious impact on non-Western countries. As such, not only has the West failed to rally a global coalition to win the struggle against Russia, but the apparent non-alignment of much of Asia in this conflict suggests that the outcome of the longer-term struggle against China also remains unclear.

A militarily reinforced transatlantic alliance, if paired with a relative loss of influence in much of the developing world, does not on balance represent a clear long-term win for the West when it comes to shaping the future of global order. If this only adds to the existing drivers taking us toward a multipolar world, in which U.S. power is checked to a

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<sup>19</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, “Navigating the New Age of Great-Power Competition,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-great-power-competition-russia-guide>.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Gonzalez, “Putin’s big bet: Sanction-proofing Russia,” NPR, February 25, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/25/1083051388/putins-big-bet-sanction-proofing-russia>.

degree by other states, it raises the longer-term question of what role the United States and its allies are prepared to accord Russia in the European security order.

## Russia's place in Europe

Russia's place in the European security order has remained unresolved since the end of the Cold War. Attempts to create "common spaces" from Lisbon to Vladivostok or to produce a revised European Security Treaty have all floundered.<sup>21</sup> The consolidation of Europe's post-Cold War continental order around NATO and the EU has left Russia without a role in a shared security system that it can deem to be commensurate with its claimed status and attuned to its declared vital interests.

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The question of Russia's place in Europe is at the core of the current war – and not merely because it began with Moscow's demand for security guarantees within the European security architecture.<sup>22</sup> The conventional narrative is that this war is about Ukraine and its right to remain a sovereign country on a path toward liberal democracy and Western institutions. In reality, however, this war is more about Russia – specifically whether it is committed to remaining an imperial power convinced of its own exceptionalism. This, in turn, touches on perhaps the fundamental issue that has plagued relations between Russia and the West in the post-Cold War era, namely that each side has sought to transform the other.

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<sup>21</sup> "EU/Russia: The four 'Common Spaces,'" European Commission, March 18, 2005, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_05\\_103](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_05_103); President of Russia, "The draft of the European Security Treaty," November 29, 2009, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152>.

<sup>22</sup> Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, "Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees," December 17, 2021, [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en).

Russia emerged from the Cold War genuinely wishing to join the West, albeit only on terms it deemed acceptable. For Moscow, the price of friendly relations was that the West should qualify its entrenched structure of U.S. leadership to create an entirely different – and more inclusive – type of European political and security community, although what such a community would look like was uncertain.<sup>23</sup> The Western approach, by contrast, assumed convergence in the realm of values (and effective subservience to the Western strategic and economic agendas) to be the surest sign of a friendly Russia.<sup>24</sup> Each side's failure to adhere to the other's expectations set both Russia and Western countries up for disappointment.

This tendency to hope that the other side will transform is also baked into the current war: Regime change in Russia and the demise of a liberal internationalist foreign policy in the West remain each side's likely preferred outcome. But this dynamic long predates the war. If it remains intact, it suggests not only that attempts to arrive at a stable post-war equilibrium will be extremely fraught, but also that efforts to extricate the continent from today's prolonged and dangerous standoff will be exceedingly difficult. The longer the war in Ukraine continues, the more the European peace dividend of the past several decades appears irretrievable.

Some may argue that if Russia were defeated in Ukraine these issues would be resolved, with Moscow compelled to accept Ukraine's alignment with the West. But a military defeat could have the opposite effect: Rather than ending Russian chauvinism and imperialism it could usher in a new period of revanchism. Putin's successor, whoever that might be, will inherit this war or its legacy, and, given the current climate, will have difficulty distancing himself from it to an extent that the United States and its allies can deem politically sufficient. Some of the Russian political class may feel that invading Ukraine was a mistake, but security concerns among the elite over NATO expansion remain pervasive and the discursive framing of Russia–West relations as

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<sup>23</sup> Sakwa, Richard, *Russia Against the Rest: The Post Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 67-68.

<sup>24</sup> Kadri Liik, "In search of 'business not as usual' with Russia," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 29, 2019, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_business\\_not\\_as\\_usual\\_russia\\_eu\\_us\\_relations/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_business_not_as_usual_russia_eu_us_relations/).



hostile has become entrenched. By now they might see a military victory as a matter of national prestige.<sup>25</sup>

Nor can one wish Russia away in the hope that its future lies in the East. Irrespective of the Eurasianist discourse promoted in Russian political circles in recent years, one of the principal benefits of the Sino–Russian partnership for Moscow is to de–securitize a theater of secondary importance (Central Asia) to be able to devote more resources towards its rivalry with the West.<sup>26</sup> Russia will remain both Western and Eastern. Even Peter the Great, to whom Putin compared himself last year, is remembered as a Westernizer, though he waged wars of territorial expansion in Europe.<sup>27</sup>

## *Great power or not, Russia retains significant disruptive power and a sizable stake in the European security system.*

Great power or not, Russia retains significant disruptive power and a sizable stake in the European security system. One may content oneself with the notion that Russia will eventually come around to the West’s perspective once it becomes a liberal democracy, however unlikely this prospect may be – and however problematic as well, given that it presupposes a major power can be told what its own interests are. But such a day is still very far off. The most probable outcome is that Russia reconstitutes itself after the war as a power of some kind, just as Western states are most likely to retain their current strategic postures rather than acquiesce to Moscow’s normative preferences for how to organize European security.

Therefore, the structural challenge of finding an adequate place for an exceptional and distinct Russia in a Europe of ordinary nation–states remains on the historical agenda.

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<sup>25</sup> For more on how the war in Ukraine has strengthened nationalist tendencies in Russia, see Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “Putin’s Forever War,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-forever-war>.

<sup>26</sup> Sergei A. Karaganov. “From East to West, or Greater Eurasia,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 25, 2016, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/from-east-to-west-or-greater-eurasia/>; Michael Kofman, “Towards a Sino-Russian entente?” *Riddle*, November 29, 2019, <https://ridl.io/towards-a-sino-russian-entente/>.

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Rainsford. “Putin and Peter the Great: Russian leader likens himself to 18th Century tsar,” *BBC News*, June 10, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61767191>.

Given that grievances over Russia's place in the European security order featured prominently in the leadup to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the dynamics of the Ukrainian conflict and the continental order are profoundly interlinked. Just as a prolonged conflict in Ukraine makes arriving at a new continental security order more difficult, if the United States does not signal openness to building a new continental pact the war will continue, further undermining Ukraine's prospects for achieving security.

Russia's relationship with Ukraine is complex, due to post-colonial tendencies as much as security-related perceptions. Discussing the future contours of a European security order in a fashion that addresses both Moscow's and Kyiv's legitimate concerns may not entirely alleviate Russia's post-imperial (or indeed present imperial) syndrome, just as a complete Ukrainian victory does not guarantee this. But it nonetheless presents a better alternative than a continued and potentially uncontrollable spiral of violence with an endpoint no one can predict.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The U.S. strategy in Ukraine so far has seen significant successes. Kyiv has been able to reverse the tide of the war to a degree few initially thought possible, while the Biden administration has rightly struck a cautious balance between assisting Ukraine and keeping U.S. forces out of the fighting.

However, the longer the war continues, the greater the risk that Washington becomes a co-belligerent of some kind – in practical if not in legal terms.<sup>28</sup> Moscow's claim that it is fighting not against Ukraine but rather against NATO on Ukrainian territory may serve a political purpose, but the greater Russia's setbacks the more likely this narrative is to be genuinely believed. Nor can the degree of U.S. support for Ukraine beyond 2023 be predicted with certainty. As such, a prolonged conflict may come with certain opportunities, such as weakening Russia's armed forces on the cheap, but it also presents significant risks. And, as outlined above, there are limits to Washington's ability

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<sup>28</sup> Christopher Caldwell. "Russia and Ukraine Have Incentives to Negotiate. The U.S. Has Other Plans," *The New York Times*, February 7, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/07/opinion/russia-ukraine-us-tanks.html>.

to shape Russian behavior and steer the conflict toward an acceptable outcome without addressing the issues plaguing Europe's security order.

Despite Russia's partial military mobilization aimed at stabilizing its lines, further Ukrainian gains cannot be ruled out. If Moscow continues to insist on what are effectively maximalist terms, then talks aimed at producing a ceasefire will likely be fruitless. But after renewed Ukrainian offensives in the spring and summer, it may be possible to determine with greater confidence the extent to which Kyiv can make sustained and significant progress toward reclaiming its occupied territory. By that point, it may have become evident to both Moscow and Kyiv that realizing the entirety of their military aims is impractical, at least within the confines of the current war.

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As such, the autumn of 2023 may mark a moment where transatlantic allies can develop and put forward a shared understanding of an end to the current phase of hostilities and the conditions for a ceasefire or partial negotiated settlement that both Kyiv and Moscow might accept. This, in turn, may shift popular discourse in the United States and Europe gradually away from what equipment and measures Ukraine needs to win toward the more crucial task of rebuilding the country.

While maintaining support for Ukraine, the Biden administration should begin developing policy proposals to put into action later this year. These could be threefold – and would be aimed at persuading Moscow that it can secure some of its core interests through diplomatic rather than military means.

First, the Biden administration should explicitly state its willingness to renew and reinterpret the principle of indivisible security in the Euro–Atlantic region, both in

bilateral formats and at the OSCE. Such a move would demonstrate the administration's ability to exhibit strategic empathy, as Russia's principal grievances in the post-Cold War era have primarily concerned its perceived second-tier status in the European security order. More than strategic stability and arms control, this touches on the question of which core principles should inform that order. As a reciprocal good-faith and trust-building measure, senior Russian officials should clearly communicate that their country's principal interest rests in achieving security guarantees rather than extinguishing Ukrainian nationhood.

While the room for achieving consensus between Russia and the West on the status of Ukraine has decidedly shrunk since the beginning of the war, the principle of indivisible security offers more promise. In Moscow's interpretation, indivisible security implies that no state in the Euro-Atlantic area should increase its security at the expense of another state.<sup>29</sup> Signaling a desire to develop shared understandings on the nature of this principle could therefore clear a path for more detailed discussions on security guarantees for both Russia and Ukraine. It would also help to alleviate Russia's perception of the existential nature of this war, given that the prevailing Western interpretation of the principle centers on the inseparability of human and state-centric security concerns, which has served as a pretext for Western criticism of what Russia sees as its internal affairs.

Second, the United States should begin consultations with its European allies on proposals to lift some of the economic measures taken against Russia, if Moscow agrees to fulfill certain conditions in return. For example, sanctions on Russian state assets could be partially removed in exchange for a phased Russian withdrawal from occupied territory and the insertion of an internationally recognized interposing force. Further good-faith measures could be accompanied by the restoration of other economic ties, with the recognition that weaponized interdependence is still preferable to no interdependence — as the latter option essentially leaves Moscow with the threat

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<sup>29</sup> Alexander Graef and Ulrich Kühn. "A Letter from Moscow: (In)Divisible Security and Helsinki 2.0.," *War on the Rocks*, February 14, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/a-letter-from-moscow-indivisible-security-and-helsinki-2-0/>.

of force as its only remaining means of exerting influence in Europe, where it still has significant interests.

While the lifting of sanctions would only take place after Russia has fulfilled certain measures, for the sake of credibility the Biden administration must indicate that it is open to this possibility. So long as Moscow believes that there is little prospect of sanctions relief, it will have no incentive to compromise on its military aims, which only further drives the logic of escalation. Voices in the U.S. Congress, among the more hawkish EU members, and in the Russian security establishment may relish the opportunity to decouple economically and entrench a permanent dynamic of confrontation. The longer the current state of war continues, the less of an incentive there may be to re-establish economic linkages – one of the few areas in which a common European space of sorts persisted despite the growing divergence of political systems on the continent. Now is the time for sober-minded officials to demonstrate leadership, in recognition of the fact that all sides will need to learn to share the Euro-Atlantic space they call home.

*While the lifting of sanctions would only take place after Russia has fulfilled certain measures, for the sake of credibility the Biden administration must indicate that it is open to this possibility.*

Finally, with Russia putting its economy on a war footing and Western countries looking to restore their ability to ramp up military-industrial production, the Biden administration should launch a transatlantic task force to develop proposals for pairing enhancements to Western military capabilities with East-West multilateral safeguards. While arriving at traditional arms control agreements has proven exceptionally difficult since the signing of the New START deal and the deepening of the world's multipolar power structure, persistent efforts to identify ad hoc arrangements would help to avoid a race to the bottom. And given that a ceasefire or settlement in Ukraine could eventually involve an arms control component regarding limitations on the placement of

forces and missiles, this task force could have a positive effect on efforts to prevent renewed hostilities between Moscow and Kyiv.

None of these proposals would force the United States to abandon what it currently perceives as its principal foreign policy goals and interests. They merely offer an opportunity to develop a more sustainable and far-sighted approach to managing relations with American adversaries. This strategy would recognize the limits of compellence without an equivalent modicum of reassurance, while acknowledging the need to manage regional security frameworks with an inclusive mindset in the absence of prospects for a fully cooperative security order.

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