



REPORT

EUROPE'S BROKEN ORDER AND THE PROSPECT OF A NEW COLD WAR

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Cover page photo: NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg visits an exhibition displaying destroyed Russian military vehicles in Kyiv on 20 April 2023. REUTERS/ Gleb Garanich/ Scanpix

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
Comecon	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
MAP	Membership Action Plan
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NGO	non-governmental organization
NRC	NATO-Russia Council
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Russian and Western visions of European security have profoundly different ideational roots: balance of power embedded in realist geopolitics versus liberal rules-based order. Russia is a revisionist state aiming to re-establish a European security order based on balance of power, including a recognition of its empire and sphere of influence. Russia's aggressive pursuit of this vision has forced the West to defend the rules-based liberal order in Europe and beyond.

This report analyses the main sources and implications of Russia's discontent with the post-Cold War European security order, which eventually led to the invasion of Ukraine. It highlights the Kremlin's long-term grievances: its unmet desire to be on an equal footing with the US; its view of NATO and EU enlargement as Western interference into its self-proclaimed sphere of privileged interests; and its perception of pro-democracy protests in Ukraine and other neighbouring countries as a tool of Western influence and threat to the Russian regime. The increasingly authoritarian nature of the Russian regime has reinforced its imperialist ambitions and deepened tensions with the West.

The disagreements between Russia and the West over European order are likely to endure beyond the war in Ukraine. The Russian vision of European security architecture was clearly articulated in the two documents that it presented to NATO and the US in December 2021, which aimed at restoration of Russia's sphere of influence and withdrawal of NATO's presence to pre-1997 borders. There is continuity from the more vaguely formulated Medvedev's proposal for a new European Security Treaty of 2009 to the unmasked revisionist agenda of 2021 which Russia was now ready to pursue through full-scale war.

The report identifies three scenarios for the future of European security, the most likely one being a dual order. It would consist of the liberal rules-based order further strengthened and enlarged among Western countries including Ukraine, while Russia would hold on to its imperialist ambitions but be forced to accept a much more limited sphere of influence than the former Soviet or tsarist empires. This would mean a new Cold War-like relationship, although the broader international context is in many ways different from the Cold War era. In the second scenario, Western unity and rules-based order would collapse and a new balance of power would emerge, with Russia regaining parts of its sphere of influence. The third, idealist scenario foresees the adoption of the liberal rules-based order by Russia following a clear defeat in Ukraine and radical domestic change.

As long as the worldview that underlies Russia's foreign policy does not change, any new balance of power will be temporary and under threat of renewed aggression once Russia has regained strength. In order to make it more sustainable, the West will need to eliminate grey zones, ensure credible deterrence and defence and consistently weaken Russia's ability to rebuild its military might.

INTRODUCTION

When the Cold War ended, deep differences between Russian and western visions of European security remained. The differences – at the level of ideas and worldviews – laid the basis for the accumulation of tensions during subsequent decades. However, it took Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine for the West to start acknowledging that a common security order with Russia is impossible until the latter goes through a radical transformation. The war has shown that the Russian and western visions of the European security order are incompatible in principle, which makes a compromise impossible without one side giving up on its core principles.¹ The West can either respect the sovereignty of all European countries and include them in the Euro-Atlantic security structures – if they so choose and are willing to meet the conditions – or respect what Russia calls its “legitimate security interests” and deny the sovereignty of its neighbours.

The Russian views on international and European security order have been extensively analysed in earlier studies.² Previous

characterisations of the Russian positions regarding post-Cold War security have varied: including the understanding that Russia has been a revisionist power aiming to destroy the existing order since 2008 or that Russia has been only aiming at minor amendments.³ Since December 2021 (as expressed in Russian documents analysed below) and, even more evidently, since February 2022 (when a new level of aggression followed the ultimatums), the revisionist character of Russia's actions and goals has been in plain sight.

This report focuses on the longer-term **ideational foundations** that underlie the current Russian-western conflict over the European security order and provide the basis for mapping out its possible outcomes. While the western approach to European security has been shaped by the liberal paradigm of rules-based order, Russian foreign and security policy remained strongly attached to a realist concept of international relations throughout the post-Cold War era.⁴ This entails an interpretation

The Russian approach to European security can be understood as an aspiration to re-establish an order based on the balance of power, including a recognition of its empire and sphere of influence

of international relations as dominated by a never-ending competition between major powers, where conflicts over the balance of power are ultimately determined by force. The Russian approach to European security can be understood as an aspiration to re-establish an order based on the balance of power, including a recognition of its empire and sphere of influence, in accordance with the worldview of realist geopolitics. Russia's aggressive pursuit

¹ As argued by Kristi Raik and Martin Hurt, “[Building European Security Against Russia – A View From Estonia](#),” *ICDS*, November 2022. This paper develops the argument further.

² E.g., Derek Averre, “[The Ukraine Conflict: Russia's Challenge to European Security Governance](#),” *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 68, No. 4 (June 2016): 699-725; Anne L Clunan, “[Russia and the liberal world order](#),” *Ethics & International Affairs* Vol. 32, No. 1 (March 2018): 45-59; Rachel Ellehuus and Andrei Zagorski, “[Restoring the European Security Order](#),” *CSIS*, March 2019; Tuomas Forsberg, “[Russia and the European security order revisited: from the congress of Vienna to the post-cold war](#),” *European Politics and Society* Vol. 20, No. 2. (November 2018): 154-71; Andrey Makarychev, “[Russia and Its 'New Security Architecture' in Europe: A Critical Examination of the Concept](#),” *CEPS*, February 2009; Viatcheslav Morozov, “[Aimed for the Better, Ended up with the Worst: Russia and International Order](#),” *Journal on Baltic Security* Vol. 1, No.1 (2015): 26-36; Tatiana Romanova, “[Russia's Neorevisionist Challenge to the Liberal International Order](#),” *International Spectator* Vol. 53, Issue 1 (January 2018): 76-91.

³ Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, “[Putin's Last Stand. The Promise and Peril of Russian Defeat](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, 20 December 2022; For an overview, see Elias Götz and Camille-Renaud Merlen, “[Russia and the question of world order](#),” *European Politics and Society* Vol. 20, Issue 2 (November 2018): 133-53.

⁴ James Sherr characterised Russian geopolitics as “austere and adamant realism,” see: James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad* (Chatham House, 2013), 12; Margot Light, “[Keynote Article: Russia and the EU: Strategic Partners or Strategic Rivals?](#),” *Journal of Common Market Studies* Vol. 46 (September 2008): 7-27; Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

of this vision has forced the West to defend the rules-based liberal order in Europe and beyond.

The report analyses the main sources and implications of Russia's discontent with the post-Cold War European security order, which cumulated up to the invasion of Ukraine. Three major, interrelated dimensions of conflict stand out: first, Russia's flawed quest for "equality" in defining the European order; second, its claim to a sphere of influence; and third, the growing tension between democracy and authoritarianism. All these aspects are deeply rooted in the different ideational basis of the Russian and western approaches: balance of power embedded in realist geopolitics versus liberal rules-based order.

The differences between worldviews are rather enduring, although states may profoundly redefine their foreign and security policy through major shocks such as the defeat of Nazi Germany in WWII. If Russia is defeated in Ukraine, this holds out the possibility of a deep transformation in Russia's understanding of its place in world politics and relations with neighbouring countries. Such a radical change would entail Russia giving up the ideas of empire and spheres of influence abroad, as well as developing democratic rule at home. However, it might take decades to build up or not occur at all.

Drawing on our review of the Russian-western disagreements, the paper outlines three post-war scenarios:

- First, a dual order resembling the Cold War era but with a much more limited Russian sphere of influence.
- Second, a new order based on a realist balance of power, with Russia regaining parts of its sphere of influence.
- Third, the western understanding of rules-based order being adopted by Russia.

We argue that the first scenario is the most probable one: the future of European security will likely be defined by the continued coexistence of two competing visions of order – the western liberal rules-based order and the Russian realist vision of balance of power

supported by spheres of influence. Finally, the paper suggests ways for the West to make the new Cold War-like order stable and sustainable.

1. COMPETING AND COEXISTING MODELS OF SECURITY ORDER

The analytical framework of our analysis is centred around two alternative models of security order: liberal rules-based order and balance of power engrained in realist geopolitics. The two models reflect liberal and realist theories of international relations which lay out competing understandings of the basic features of interstate relations. The paper is interested in how liberalism and realism provide broad conceptual frameworks that are reflected in the worldviews, strategies, interests, and actions of states and other international actors. Liberal rules-based order and realist balance of power are seen here as competing ideational constructions through which foreign policy actors give meaning to the surrounding reality and define their positions and policies.

A fundamental aspect of the liberal order is the establishment of commonly agreed norms and principles embedded in institutional mechanisms

The existing, yet broken, order that Russia wishes to radically revise is the liberal rules-based order, which emerged as a result of the post-WWII settlement and was further strengthened, particularly in Europe, after the end of the Cold War. A fundamental aspect of the liberal order, which makes it rules-based, is the establishment of commonly agreed norms and principles embedded in institutional mechanisms that ensure their implementation. The UN, which is at the core of the global rules-based order, established a set of security norms aimed at preventing future wars and providing for peaceful settlement of conflicts. However, it evidently lacks effective implementation mechanisms to ensure the implementation of these norms. The war in Ukraine – and the crimes Russia has committed there – has revived discussions about reform

of the UN.⁵ Being a permanent member of the Security Council, Russia has been able to block any serious response to the grave violations of the core principles of the UN Charter.

Apart from and historically preceding the liberal rules-based order, alternative types of ordering interstate relations include balance of power and hegemonic order.⁶ In practice, the different models have coexisted in Europe's modern history, just as they have coexisted and competed in US foreign policy thinking. During the Cold War, the UN provided a thin layer of commonly agreed rules; they (as is often forgotten) were largely not valid in Central and Eastern Europe that was under Soviet domination sustained by coercion and, failing that, violence.⁷ Yet certain core security norms were respected, such as no forceful change of borders. The latter was broken for the first time after WWII when Russia annexed Crimea. In Europe, there was an effort to strengthen common continent-wide security norms through the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) that adopted the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. The CSCE turned out to be a double-edged sword for the Soviet Union. On the one hand, it gained a de facto recognition of its sphere of influence but, on the other hand, entered an agreement that turned into a tool for exposing its violations of human rights norms codified in the Helsinki Final Act. After the Cold War, the CSCE was renamed the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and became one of the main frameworks for European security cooperation involving Russia. Similarly to the UN, the credibility of the OSCE has been severely crippled by Russia's war against Ukraine.⁸

The rules-based order evolved much further among the western countries that established

organisations such as NATO and the European Communities built on shared values and principles of democracy and the market economy. The western organisations not only had a stronger common foundation but also established more binding institutional mechanisms to sustain the common norms and facilitate the pursuit of shared interests. The Soviet bloc created its own structures such as the Comecon and Warsaw Pact that, unlike the western organisations, were not based on voluntary accession by sovereign states. The common order resting upon organisations such as the UN and OSCE was accompanied by a "containment order, which was based on the balance of power, nuclear deterrence, and political and ideological competition" between the US-led western countries and the Soviet Union.⁹ The old balance of power among European states was replaced with a new one that divided the continent between the two superpowers.¹⁰

The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a period of US hegemony characterised by a predominance in terms of both hard and soft power. At the same time, the liberal rules-based order was deepened and enlarged under US leadership. The idea of including Russia in the European liberal order gained traction in the early 1990s but, for reasons discussed below, was doomed to fail. Russia continued to view European security through the lens of the balance of power, which changed significantly to Russia's disadvantage. The rules-based order remained shallow, lacking truly shared values and norms, as Russia did not develop into a functioning democracy and did not abandon its imperialistic attitude towards neighbours.

2. GROWING TENSIONS BETWEEN THE RUSSIAN AND WESTERN VISIONS

A number of post-Cold War era developments moved European security further away from the Russian vision. The list of Russia's

⁵ Evelyn Leopold, "[Will UN Reform Happen This Year? Don't Hold Your Breath](#)," *Pass Blue*, 30 January 2023.

⁶ John Ikenberry, "Varieties of Order: Balance of Power, Hegemonic, and Constitutional," in *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton Scholarship Online, April 2019), 21-49; Kalevi J Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648-1989* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁷ As evidenced in Budapest 1956 and Prague 1968.

⁸ Bradley Reynolds and Johanna Ketola, "[The OSCE and a 21st century spirit of Helsinki: Opportunities to shift security back to the people](#)," *Finnish Institute for International Affairs* (FIIA) Briefing Paper 346. (February 2022).

⁹ G John Ikenberry, "[The Myth of Post-Cold War Chaos](#)," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 75, No. 3 (May-June 1996): 79-91.

¹⁰ Robert Cooper, *The breaking of nations. Order and chaos in the twenty-first century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 12.

grievances with the “collective West” is long and well-documented. Russia yearned for “equality” not with its neighbours but with other major powers; enlargement of the EU and NATO violated Russia’s self-proclaimed right to a sphere of influence; and the “colour revolutions” that the Kremlin saw as “western-orchestrated” threatened Putin’s authoritarian regime.¹¹ Moscow was increasingly irritated by what it perceived as neglect of its “legitimate security concerns” by the West – while profoundly different views on what constituted a “legitimate security concern” were a root cause of tensions. Even in the 1990s, Russia’s great power aspirations were not really concealed from the West. Rather, it was the West who had chosen to turn a blind eye to these aspirations and refused to engage with them until it was forced to do so by Russia. Despite its weakness, Russia fought a war against Chechnya, which was seeking independence from Russia, in 1994-96, using brutal and extensive force against civilians, and followed by an equally brutal second Chechen war in 1999-2009.¹² Ever since coming to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin engaged in restoring – proactively and increasingly aggressively – Russia’s great power status. However, he was a product of the system, enabled by an economic boom of the 2000s, and not its creator.

2.1. RUSSIA’S FLAWED QUEST FOR EQUALITY

When liberal forces led by Yeltsin took power in Moscow after the collapse of the Soviet Union, their expectation was that a radical transformation of European order would take place, and the distinction between the East and the West would disappear. Cold War-era security arrangements would be replaced with pan-European ones, and Russia would become an important part of the new pluralistic order.¹³ At the same time, Russia had started to redefine its national

interests and to look for a new place in the post-Cold War world. While liberals defined those new interests as economic integration and adaption to prevalent norms, Russia’s “great power aspirations” (i.e., its right to dominate others) did not disappear. Russia’s foreign policy concept of 1992 outlined goals that have been central to its policies to this day: Moscow would oppose the politico-military presence of third countries in states adjoining Russia and protect the rights of Russians and the Russian-speaking population.¹⁴

The West did not share the Russian expectation for drastic changes in pre-existing arrangements but rather expected Russia to adapt and possibly be integrated on the condition of adopting western norms (which, for a time, Russia’s leaders stated coincided with their own). Even among the proponents of a transformed NATO, there was little appetite for surrendering the organisation’s autonomy. Likewise, the EU was prepared to include post-Soviet countries in the integration project strictly on the basis of their ability and willingness to adhere to EU “conditionality” and adopt its norms. Any serious rapprochement between Russia and the West was thus ruled out a priori by different premises for the new relationship. What western leaders were reluctant to acknowledge – or thought they could manage through cooperation and diplomacy – was the prospect of a weakened Russia that nonetheless maintained its geopolitical ambitions and would sooner or later have the strength to move towards re-establishing its sphere of influence. The Russian imperial impulse was expected to wither away as Russia integrated more closely with Europe.

Russia’s quest for equality remained focused on an a priori entitlement: the perceived rightful position of Russia as a major power equal to the US

Even after the Cold War, Russia’s quest for equality remained focused on an a priori entitlement: the perceived rightful position of Russia as a major power equal to the US. In 2003, Anatoly Chubais championed a Russian-led “liberal empire” in the Commonwealth

¹¹ Richard Weitz, “[Putin at Valdai: A Deep Dive into Long-Standing Grievances](#),” *Eurasianet*, 24 July 2017.

¹² Mark Galeotti, *Putin’s Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine* (Osprey Publishing, 2022).

¹³ James Sherr, “Russia’s View of Interdependence: The Security Dimension”, in Kristi Raik and András Rácz (eds.) *Post-Crimea Shift in EU-Russia Relations: From Fostering Interdependence to Managing Vulnerabilities* (Tallinn: ICDS, 2019).

¹⁴ James Sherr, “Russia’s View of Interdependence,” 84.

of Independent States (CIS), while neo-traditionalists advocated the restoration of Tsarist or even Soviet imperial practices.¹⁵ Both views were motivated by the desire to place Russia once again on an equal footing with the US by reviving its empire. In this perception, they betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of US power and influence in Europe. The Kremlin's resentment over what it perceived as a lack of equal treatment by the US was not only one of the factors that led to the invasion of Ukraine but was also a component of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.¹⁶ As the Russian view on NATO and EU enlargements showed, Moscow's demands

Equality was seen as a prerogative of power, rather than an attribute of state sovereignty

for an equal right to define the European order were built on denial of such equality to countries that Russia wished to keep under its sphere of influence. In other words, equality was seen as a prerogative of power, rather than an attribute of state sovereignty, as recognised by the UN Charter and international law.

2.2. NATO AND EU ENLARGEMENT

Russia has expressed two main concerns with regard to NATO enlargement, with both indicating that it did not give up the idea of maintaining its sphere of influence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. First, it viewed the Alliance's "expansion" as an act of bad faith that allegedly broke agreements made in the late Soviet period in the context of German reunification. According to the Russian narrative, although not supported by documents of that time, NATO crossed previously agreed red lines while Moscow was

unable to resist and abused Moscow's weak strategic position to advance its own interests on the continent.¹⁷

Secondly, Russia has maintained the view of NATO as an existential threat; hence, enlargement has been seen as a direct challenge to Moscow. To the Kremlin, the continued existence of NATO after the end of the Cold War, coupled with Russia's exclusion from the alliance, highlighted that the Alliance was targeted against Russia.¹⁸ For its part, NATO adamantly denied any non-expansion agreements with Russia, stating in a 2014 factsheet that: "No such pledge was made, and no evidence to back up Russia's claims has ever been produced."¹⁹ These claims have also been disputed by many decision-makers and analysts,

including former US administration officials who were at the reunification talks with the USSR, as well as by Mikhail Gorbachev himself.²⁰

By insisting that NATO had no right to enlarge, Moscow tried to intervene in NATO's autonomous decision-making and deny foreign policy agency to sovereign states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that aspired to join the Alliance out of their own will. The fact that

The fact that new members have asked to join NATO – and not vice versa – had no effect on how Russia felt about the matter

new members have asked to join NATO – and not vice versa – had no effect on how Russia felt about the matter.²¹ What mattered for the Kremlin was that enlargement limited Russia's geopolitical room for manoeuvre and stopped it from exerting influence on former vassals.

¹⁵ Igor Torbakov, "[Russian Policymakers Air Notion of 'Liberal Empire' in Caucasus, Central Asia](#)," *Eurasianet*, 27 October 2003; Richard Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 70-71.

¹⁶ Sergey Radchenko and Vladislav Zubok, "[The Secret History and Unlearned Lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis](#)," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 102, No. 3 (2023): 44-63.

¹⁷ Joshua R Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "[Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion](#)," *Quarterly Journal: International Security* Vol. 40, No.4 (2016): 7-44; Forsberg, "Russia and the European security order revisited."

¹⁸ Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Deal or No Deal?"

¹⁹ "[Russia's Accusations - Setting the Record Straight](#)," North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 13 May 2014.

²⁰ Mark Kramer, "[The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia](#)," *Washington Quarterly* Vol. 32, No. 2 (April 2009): 39-61; Mikhail Gorbachev, "[I am against all walls](#)," *RBTH*, 14 October 2017.

²¹ Sergey Rogov, "[NATO and Russia: A View from Moscow](#)," *Politique Étrangère* (Hors série) No. 5 (January 2009) : 107-21

The Russian interest was to keep a buffer zone of “friendly” or neutral states around it.²²

NATO’s continued enlargement has rejected the Russian claims and affirmed the sovereign right of countries to join. However, NATO countries made a costly strategic mistake by adopting an ambiguous position on the potential membership of Ukraine and Georgia in 2008. Before that, Russia – and Putin – had, on multiple occasions, stressed their good relations with the Alliance, and did not – at least in words – directly oppose the inclusion of the Baltic states.²³ From that moment, according to Putin, NATO’s open-door policy towards Ukraine and Georgia became a “direct threat” to Russia.²⁴ The inconclusiveness of the Bucharest Summit’s outcome, however, turned into an encouragement for Russia to try to keep these countries under its sphere of influence. In 2008, the Allies agreed that Ukraine and Georgia would join the Alliance one day. Yet, they were not offered a Membership Action Plan (MAP) that was required before accession, thereby showing that NATO was actually not ready to take any steps to deliver on the new commitment. It was a compromise between those members – notably the US and eastern flank countries – who were pushing for enlargement and others – Germany and France in particular – who opposed any move toward membership of these countries. Such a solution was perceived as provocative by the Kremlin, but it also suggested that some NATO countries were de facto respecting Russia’s privileged role in the post-Soviet space (excluding the three Baltic states).

Moscow’s attitude toward EU enlargement – although not initially hostile – soured as the EU’s clout in what Russia saw as its sphere of influence increased

Moscow’s attitude toward EU enlargement – although not initially hostile – soured as the EU’s clout in what Russia saw as its sphere of influence increased. At the same time, Moscow

²² Rogov, “NATO and Russia: A View from Moscow,” 10.

²³ Robert Person and Michael McFaul, “[What Putin Fears Most](#),” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 33, No. 2 (April 2022): 18-27.

²⁴ Anil Dawar, “[Putin warns Nato over expansion](#),” *The Guardian*, 4 April 2008.

gradually moved away from democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, which was criticised in Brussels. It became increasingly evident that the EU, with its norms and regulations, stood in stark contrast to the client-state system of Russia. Furthermore, the Kremlin’s vision of a multipolar world left little room for competition within its sphere of influence, while the EU was violating this sphere.²⁵ Russia perceived EU enlargement as a trojan horse for NATO enlargement, which contributed to its adversity toward the organisation.²⁶

For its part, the EU’s treatment of Russia was marred by a myriad of miscalculations. In the 1990s, most European capitals saw the future of Russia as either democratisation under Yeltsin or a return to communism. When

By far the biggest miscalculation was the increase in dependency on Russian energy within the EU

Moscow had, in fact, started moving away from democracy under Yeltsin, neither the EU nor any individual western countries did anything to stop this trend out of fear of bringing the communists back to power. Moreover, during these crucial years, the EU failed to act in unison, so member states were dealing with Russia separately and with varying degrees of success. This supported Russia’s preference for dealing with member states separately while leaving Brussels in the background.²⁷ By far the biggest miscalculation was the increase in dependency on Russian energy within the EU, which continued even after 2014. The EU held on to the idea of positive economic interdependence with Russia, while the Kremlin converted energy trade into a tool for pursuing its geopolitical agenda.²⁸

Russia’s increasingly antagonistic views on EU and NATO enlargement are rooted

²⁵ Irina Busygina, *Russia–EU Relations and the Common Neighborhood* (Routledge, 2017), 84-5.

²⁶ Mukesh Shankar Bharti, “[EU-Russian Relations and the Eastern Enlargement: Integration or Isolation](#),” *Journal of Scientific Papers: Social Development and Security* Vol. 11, Issue 6 (December 2021): 5.

²⁷ Busygina, “*Russia–EU Relations and the Common Neighborhood*,” 89-90.

²⁸ Stefan Meister, “[A Paradigm Shift: EU-Russia Relations After the War in Ukraine](#),” *Carnegie Europe*, 29 November 2022.

in its strategic thinking of geopolitical realism. It sees the necessity of a sphere of influence and equates neighbours that are not under Moscow's direct control with hostile forces. Russia has developed a self-perception, with long roots in history, of an empire entitled to a sphere of influence that should be recognised by other major powers – a view that has been reinforced in the context of its war against Ukraine. Since the early days of imperial Russia, the nation has always felt a need for a layer of defence around its “vulnerable” core territory on the Eurasian plain.²⁹ As long as Russia remains an empire, it is unlikely that it will ever voluntarily allow its neighbours to act independently of Moscow. Therefore,

As long as this imperial perspective survives, the friction between Europe and Russia will continue regardless of who sits in the Kremlin

as long as this imperial perspective survives, the friction between Europe and Russia will continue regardless of who sits in the Kremlin. This also means that it was not NATO (and EU) enlargement which placed Russia and the West on a collision course. For the Russian regime, its neighbours can only be its vassals or its enemies. By excluding Eastern Europe from the trans-Atlantic structures which they wanted to join, the West would have left them in Russia's sphere of influence, denying their agency and sovereignty.

2.3. DEMOCRACY AND AUTHORITARIANISM

While Russia was gradually becoming more authoritarian under Putin's rule, Eastern Europe experienced a wave of so-called colour revolutions, most importantly in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, which became another source of growing tensions between Russia and the West. Putin's view on popular uprisings in the former Soviet space was closely linked to his increasingly cynical view of western meddling in Russia's affairs. Moscow refused to see the colour revolutions as legitimate bottom-up demonstrations of the people's will; instead, it portrayed them as western-sponsored

coups that once again encroached upon Russia's sphere of influence.³⁰ This interpretation fits neatly with the Kremlin's narrative of being isolated by the West. The Kremlin's paranoia was supported by the timing of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine just six months after the accession of eight CEE countries (including the Baltic states) into the EU, as well as active Western support to pro-democracy NGOs in many former Soviet countries.³¹

A key concern in the Kremlin was the possibility of protests spreading to Russia and subsequently threatening the regime's survival.³² The lack of democracy in Russia turned the spread of colour revolutions into a threat to Putin's hold on power. The legacy of popular uprisings in Eastern Europe explains in part why Moscow became so invested in supporting Assad's Syria a few years later. By preventing further dominoes from falling, Putin believed that he was also guaranteeing the stability of his own regime.³³

What adds further complexity to the issue is that the degree of western influence is hardly measurable in the case of these popular revolutions. No western government has ever defined regime change in Eastern European countries as a policy goal. Nevertheless, the Russian leadership has been claiming that popular revolutions were sponsored and orchestrated by the West. Yet little to no serious evidence to support Russia on the matter exists.³⁴ Western support to pro-democracy groups in Eastern Europe was transparent and based on the bottom-up wish of citizens in these countries to democratise.³⁵ Yet in Putin's thinking, democratisation in neighbouring countries became an existential threat to his regime and a source of tension between Russia and the West that was virtually impossible to remove.

³⁰ Person and McFaul, “What Putin Fears Most.”

³¹ Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics* (Taylor & Francis Group, London, 2010), 4.

³² Person and McFaul, “What Putin Fears Most.”

³³ Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria* (RAND Corporation, 2019), 5.

³⁴ Ó Beacháin and Polese, *The Colour Revolutions*.

³⁵ See Andrew Wilson, “Western support to Orange Revolution” in *Ukraine's Orange Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2006).

²⁹ Anirban Paul, “Russia and the ‘Geo’ of Its Geopolitics,” *Observer Research Foundation* Vol. 202 (July 2019).

The Kremlin's understanding that revolutions, or regime changes, in neighbouring countries could be both caused and prevented by outside forces showed that it assumed such changes could not be determined by local agency. From the western perspective, by contrast, local populations were seen as legitimate political actors in their countries, and no agreement between major powers could rule out the possibility of new colour revolutions, as well as other political shocks. This point was illustrated, for example, by the Chicken Kyiv speech of US President George HW Bush in August 1991, when western decision-makers were still keen to minimise the effects of the breakup of the USSR. Despite the efforts of the American President to dissuade the Ukrainians from pursuing "suicidal nationalism," the local agency of the Ukrainians decided the fate of the country back then, just as it continues to do today.³⁶ The denial of the Ukrainian agency by Russia defined its military strategy aiming for a swift victory and regime change in early 2022, for Russia truly believed that local actors had little to no agency in how their countries were run.³⁷

Finally, despite many democratic revolutions in the former Soviet space, it is no coincidence that the one in Ukraine has sparked the greatest outcry in Russia. As was the case with NATO and EU enlargement, a strong Russian response only took place when the allegiance of Ukraine came under question, which supports Zbigniew Brzezinski's often-quoted claim that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire.³⁸

Importantly, there is a mutually reinforcing dynamic between Russian imperialism and authoritarianism. Historically, the imperial project has been seen as the "source of Russian autocracy".³⁹ However, the deepening autocracy of the Russian regime under

President Putin was an important factor explaining its increasingly aggressive and expansionist foreign policy.⁴⁰ Aggression has often served as a tool for boosting political popularity inside Russia and has been utilised by Putin for this purpose at least three times:

A reoccurring pattern of his tenure is that he is most popular when the country is in conflict

first, when he came to office after starting the second Chechen war; second, when the annexation of Crimea in 2014 raised his approval rate to unprecedented levels; and third, when the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 once again fuelled his popularity back to 83 % (from the "modest" 63 % a few months prior). A reoccurring pattern of his tenure is that he is most popular when the country is in conflict.⁴¹ Thus, although it is highly likely that Putin truly believes in the myth of the greatness of the Russian Empire, wars also serve as a practical policy tool to reinforce his regime.

Since democratic norms and principles are fundamental to the liberal rules-based order, they have become an element of the struggle over the European security order

With increasing authoritarianism inside Russia, the cleavage between western and Russian political systems, as well as their underlying values, grew and became a major source of tension. Since democratic norms and principles are fundamental to the liberal rules-based order, they have become an element of the struggle over the European security order. From the Russian perspective, the West was using "values as a tool of geopolitics."⁴² The western liberal understanding - that CEE countries aspired for democracy because they shared these values and believed these provided a better life than authoritarian rule - was refuted by the geopolitical realism and cynicism of the Kremlin.

³⁶ George H.W. Bush, "Remarks to the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of the Ukraine in Kiev, Soviet Union," George HW Bush Presidential Library & Museum, 1 August 1991.

³⁷ Jose Miguel Alonso-Trabanco, "The Evolution of Russia's Ukraine Strategy," *Geopolitical Monitor*, 30 June 2022.

³⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1998).

³⁹ Anne Applebaum, "The Russian Empire Must Die," *The Atlantic*, December 2022.

⁴⁰ For an in-depth account, see Kathryn E Stoner, *Russia Resurrected* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 256-65.

⁴¹ "Do you approve of the activities of Vladimir Putin as the president (prime minister) of Russia?," Statista, last modified 2023.

⁴² Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion*, 126.

3. HOW WOULD RUSSIA ORGANISE THE EUROPEAN SECURITY ORDER?

The above analysis makes clear that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia maintained a somewhat different vision of both European and international security than its western partners at the time and nurtured a resentment toward US hegemony. Arguably, Russia overemphasised the hegemonic or unilateral features of the post-Cold War order, while Western countries highlighted its liberal rules-based nature. A preferred model for Russia was (and is) a multipolar system based on the balance of power. After the souring of western-Russian relations in 2014, the Kremlin's representatives have repeatedly presented historical models of the balance of power in Europe as something worth emulating. For Russia, both the Congress of Vienna of 1814-15 and the Yalta Conference of February 1945 produced decades-long stability in Europe through agreement among great powers.⁴³ In this vein, in 2015, the then-Chairman of the State Duma, Sergey Naryshkin,

For Russia, both the Congress of Vienna and the Yalta Conference produced decades-long stability in Europe through agreement among great powers

urged the western leaders to study the "lessons of Yalta" in order to avoid war.⁴⁴ However, the models proposed by Russia were rejected by the West as unacceptable from the viewpoint of the existing liberal rules-based order.

3.1. MEDVEDEV'S NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY TREATY

The most significant diplomatic attempt by Russia to revise the European Security Architecture in accordance with its vision

⁴³ Forsberg, "Russia and the European security order revisited."

⁴⁴ Sergey Naryshkin, "Сергей Нарышкин призвал лидеров Запада учить "уроки Ялты" [Sergey Naryshkin calls upon Western leaders to study the "lessons of Yalta"]," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 5 February 2015.

was made by Dmitry Medvedev during his presidency. The initial idea of a new treaty was formulated by Medvedev in Berlin in June 2008, while the first actual draft proposals were put forth by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 2009.⁴⁵ Yet, despite initial enthusiasm by some western experts and policymakers such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy,

The most significant diplomatic attempt by Russia to revise the European Security Architecture in accordance with its vision was made by Dmitry Medvedev

this new European security treaty was all but forgotten for most only a few years later, regardless of the apparent desire by many in the West to continue a dialogue with Russia.⁴⁶

For some, the proposals made by Medvedev were fundamentally flawed, overly vague, and leaving the objectives of the new treaty unclear. Western partners were unsure whether the Russians wanted to create a new security institution or simply limit the influence of NATO and thus strengthen Russia's ability to oppose security developments that it did not like.⁴⁷ In any case, a key reason for western suspicion was Russia's apparent desire to displace NATO or confine it to the "historical West." Additionally, Moscow came under criticism for how the draft had been presented. With some calling the treaty "sloppily drawn-up," there remained the risk of

exhausting any discussions before they could produce anything conclusive.⁴⁸

In response to those criticisms, Russian diplomats claimed that the new treaty was meant not to replace or negate any of the existing security arrangements and organisations in Europe but to simply codify the principle of "indivisibility of security."

⁴⁵ Marcel H Van Herpen, "[Medvedev's proposal for a pan-European security pact](#)," *Cicero Foundation*, October 2008.

⁴⁶ "[Communication Reopens](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 10 August 2008.

⁴⁷ Richard Weitz, "[The Rise and Fall of Medvedev's European Security Treaty](#)," *Hudson Institute*, 30 May 2012.

⁴⁸ Ulrich Kühn, "[Medvedev's Proposals for a New European Security Order: A Starting Point or the End of the Story?](#)," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* Vol. 9, No. 2 (January 2010): 1–16.

Regarding the proposals lack of any concrete proposals to deal with specific issues, Lavrov wrote, "It is hardly possible to address specific concerns without solving this systemic problem."⁴⁹ Therefore, the Russian side made little effort to clarify the vague articles in their draft proposals, instead presenting them as an attempt at a solution to the perceived lack of a solid foundation in the European Security Architecture.

Nonetheless, for western analysts, several concerns remained. One such example was Article 2 of the draft proposal, which precipitated that:

A Party to the Treaty shall not undertake, participate in or support any actions or activities affecting significantly the security of any other Party or Parties to the Treaty.⁵⁰

Allowing such an article to be legally binding would have meant that Moscow acquired a legitimate right to prevent actions by European and Atlantic institutions, as well as individual states, on the pretext that it harms Russia's security.⁵¹ Additionally, Article 9 of that treaty would have reversed the standard clause which stipulates that parties to a new treaty declare that it does not influence their pre-existing commitments. Instead, the new treaty states that previous obligations should not contradict this new treaty. This would have, for example, limited the ability of NATO to take actions in defence of its member states if they harmed the security of others.⁵²

It soon became evident that the proposal had a hard time finding support – even in countries that were traditionally friendly toward Russia – as the inherent controversies of the new draft became obvious. German Minister of State Werner Hoyer wondered:

⁴⁹ Sergei Lavrov, "[Article by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov to be Published in Revue Defense Nationale, May 2010 Issue](#)," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, 24 May 2010.

⁵⁰ President of Russia, "[The Draft of the European Security Treaty](#)," The Kremlin, 29 November 2009.

⁵¹ Yuri Fedorov, "[Medvedev's Initiative: A Trap for Europe?](#)" *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies* Vol. 3, No.2 (2009): 45-69.

⁵² Weitz, "The Rise and Fall of Medvedev's European Security Treaty," 3.

How, for example, does the concept of indivisible security fit with the freedom of countries to choose what alliances they belong to, something to which we are all committed?⁵³

At the same time, many of the principles reiterated in the new draft were already covered by several pre-existing treaties: including but not limited to the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, the 1999 OSCE Charter for European Security, and the 2002 NATO-Russia Rome Declaration establishing the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). US diplomats also argued that negotiating a new treaty with more than 50 countries would be an extremely time-consuming and cumbersome process. In addition, questions remained as to who or what would enforce compliance with the new treaty.⁵⁴ Despite some attempts at clarifying the drafts on the Russian side, suspicions remained in the West as to the true intent behind the proposal, with some analysts even calling it a "trap for Europe."⁵⁵

Russia had already broken the principles it wanted to codify

Moreover, the lack of success of the new treaty was ex-ante influenced by the outbreak of the war in Georgia. Not only did the conflict strain and limit discussions between Russia and NATO, but it also meant that Russia had already broken the principles it wanted to codify. This idea was shared by the then-Secretary General of NATO Andres Fogh Rasmussen on his visit to Moscow in December 2009 where he implied that the main problem was not the lack of agreed principles in pre-existing agreements but the fact that that certain governments did not comply with them.⁵⁶

Despite western concerns, the proposal launched a new dialogue between Russia and the West in the framework of the OSCE, as well as the Meseberg initiative, which was designed by Germany as an effort to engage Russia in a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict

⁵³ Werner Hoyer, "[Speech by Minister of State Werner Hoyer at the opening of a conference on "European Security Dialogue and Arms Control"](#)," Federal Foreign Office, 28 April 2010.

⁵⁴ Philip H Gordon, "[Secretary Clinton's Paris Speech on European Security](#)," U.S Department of State, 1 February 2010.

⁵⁵ Fedorov, "Medvedev's Initiative," 55.

⁵⁶ "[What the Russian papers say](#)," *RIA Novosti*, 18 December 2009.

in exchange for establishing an EU-Russia security council.⁵⁷ The OSCE track culminated in the Corfu Process in 2009 which consisted of ten rounds of discussions on Medvedev's proposals.⁵⁸ Yet these discussions did not result in a common understanding, let alone an agreement. The differences between Russian and western perceptions, therefore, remained – and resurfaced with a vengeance in Moscow's new proposals for codifying security in Europe made in late 2021, in the context of build-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

3.2. FROM MEDVEDEV 2009 TO PUTIN 2021

In December 2021, Russia tabled two documents that articulated – more explicitly than ever before – its revisionist demands aimed at restoring its sphere of influence and pushing NATO's presence in Europe back to pre-1997 levels and borders. The new order was to be defined in two separate treaties between NATO and Russia and the US and Russia.⁵⁹ Although these proposals might have been drawn hastily and put forth as a red herring in a bid to create further confusion, thus buying time for Russia to prepare for the invasion, the documents still highlighted how far Russia's foreign policy objectives had crystallised by late 2021.

In order to gain a better understanding of how significantly Russia's foreign policy had shifted between 2009 and 2021, it is worth comparing the respective proposals. In terms of substance, the draft treaties presented in 2009 and 2021 were similar to one another, with the main difference being the extent and explicitness of Moscow's aims to codify its security interests. The famous Article 2 of Russia's 2009 proposals was in essence very close to Article 1 of the 2021

document. In both instances, Moscow clearly insisted on codifying the point that no nation shall increase one's own security at the cost of others and aimed to limit NATO influence. At the same time, the document of 2021 was much more intrusive and read much more like an ultimatum between two sides about to enter war. Russia's interests were unmasked,

Russia's security treaty proposal of 2021 was much more intrusive and much more similar to an ultimatum between two sides about to enter war

and Putin no longer pretended to care about the security of others. The treaty mentioned Ukraine specifically in many instances, while also aiming to limit the influence of NATO. Article 4 would ban NATO troops in countries that joined after 1997, whereas Article 6 of the treaty would codify the promise of no further NATO expansion. Article 7 would make it illegal for NATO to conduct any military activity in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Between 2009 and 2021, much had changed in European security. The 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine was followed by the ongoing occupation of Crimea; the war in eastern Ukraine certainly impacted the western capitals' opinion of Russia and soured relations. During the discussions around 2009, there was a genuine desire from both sides to engage in some form of constructive diplomacy. This was reflected in statements made by both then-President Medvedev in his first speech on the topic in Berlin, as well as his European and trans-Atlantic counterparts.⁶⁰

In contrast, by the end of 2021, this was no longer the case. As revealed by high-level officials in western administrations, diplomatic efforts by the West in the build-up

⁵⁷ Liana Fix, "[Germany's Russia Test](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 23 December 2021.

⁵⁸ Kühn, "Medvedev's Proposals."

⁵⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "[Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of The Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "[Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021.

⁶⁰ Dmitri Medvedev, "[Speech at Meeting with German Political, Parliamentary and Civic Leaders](#)," European Parliament, 5 June 2008; Office of the Press Secretary, "[Joint Statement by President Dmitry Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Barack Obama of the United States of America](#)," The White House, 30 April 2013.

to the invasion were thwarted by their Russian counterparts on multiple occasions.⁶¹ Therefore, a lack of political will from the Russian side clearly negated the possibility of any meaningful discussions in late 2021. At the same time, the US was not prepared to discuss what Russia wanted to discuss. The US and NATO made clear that it was inconceivable to enter negotiations on the basis of Russia's core demands, although the US was open to talks on security arrangements related to arms control, nuclear treaties, and military transparency measures.⁶²

In 2009, Russia still believed that it might be able to achieve its goals through a diplomatic process. The mild western reaction to the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, followed by the US attempt to “reset” relations, suggested that western countries were prepared, at least de facto if not in the form of a treaty, to respect Russia's sphere of influence. The lack of progress in Ukraine's and Georgia's aspirations toward membership in NATO and the EU sent a similar signal.

As the diplomatic process was inconclusive, Russia went on with advancing its vision of European security through other means. Although the West obviously did not agree to Russia's demands, in the Kremlin's assessment, it was not ready to push back Russia's efforts to impose its vision by force either. By contrast, many in the West seemed to believe up to February 2022 that they could reject Russia's key demands and continue to manage the relationship through diplomacy.⁶³ The West underestimated just how serious Russia was about its geopolitical goals and how far it was prepared to go in pursuing them.

Hence, in 2021, Moscow sent to the western capitals the documents that essentially stated what Russia had been craving for a long time – i.e., its own sphere of influence that extended over to Ukraine, Georgia, and the rest of

Eastern Europe. By that time, it was prepared to use any means to impose its vision of the European security order, including military invasion, which it had until then conducted with an effort of plausible deniability. The 2021 proposals were not a prelude to negotiations but a pretext for a war that Russia deemed necessary in order to defend its perceived security interests.

The 2021 proposals were not a prelude to negotiations but a pretext for a war that Russia deemed necessary in order to defend its perceived security interests

4. LIVING WITH CONFLICTING VISIONS OF ORDER – FROM THE COLD WAR TO THE PRESENT

As of today, Russia has shown no indication of changing or giving up the strategic goals outlined in the documents that it presented to the US and NATO in December 2021. Hence, Western policies have to be based on the assumption that these documents express Russia's long-term vision of European security. In the foreseeable future, the two visions – the western model of liberal rules-based order and Russia's aspiration for a renewed balance of power and spheres of influence – will coexist, as they did during the Cold War.

The Russian views are rooted in Russia's understanding of its great power status and models from Europe's modern history that established a balance among major powers ensuring relative stability for rather long periods of time. European countries and their transatlantic allies, by contrast, tend to see the liberal rules-based order created after WWII and further strengthened and expanded after the Cold War as a progressive model that has brought unprecedented levels of stability and security to Europe and is thus worth defending.

Therefore, following the post-Cold War illusion of building a common European order inclusive of Russia (which, as argued above, was never based on a sufficient degree of truly shared

⁶¹ Shane Harris, Karen DeYoung, Isabelle Khurshudyan, Ashley Parker, and Liz Sly, “[As Russia Prepared to Invade Ukraine, U.S. Struggled to Convince Zelensky, Allies of Threat](#),” *The Washington Post*, 16 August 2022.

⁶² David M Herszenhorn, “[US, NATO Deliver Written Replies to Russia on Security Demands](#),” *Politico*, 27 January 2022.

⁶³ E.g., last-moment diplomatic efforts by the French and German leaders prior to 24 February 2022.

understanding), we are back to a Cold War-like dual order – but a radically unstable one for as long as the war in Ukraine continues. There are not only significant similarities but also major differences in comparison to the Cold War.

We are back to a Cold War-like dual order – but a radically unstable one for as long as the war in Ukraine continues

A basic similarity is that, beneath a thin layer of global UN-based rules and institutions, the Western-led liberal rules-based order coexists with a balance of power characterised by the return of containment and nuclear deterrence, as well as ideological and political competition between major powers. The West does not accept the realist understanding of spheres of influence as an ordering principle, whereas Russia tries to hold on to its sphere of influence and sees NATO as a US sphere of influence. The brutal reality is that, once again, the balance of power is ultimately determined by force.

The brutal reality is that, once again, the balance of power is ultimately determined by force

Duality and tension are also created by competition between democratic and authoritarian models in Europe and on the global scale. Following the failure of the post-Cold War efforts to spread the democratic liberal order across the world, western democracies have become more protective, while western democracy promotion efforts have become more selective and limited.

- Turning to differences, **a key difference between the Cold War and today is that, back then, the Soviet Union largely accepted the de facto balance of power and boundaries of its sphere of influence.** The Soviet sphere of influence was built on brutal violence of the kind that we are witnessing in Ukraine today; but once the post-war order was established, the Soviet Union did not change borders by force. The price of stability was a half-century of occupation or subordination of Central and Eastern European nations under totalitarian

rule. Today, Russia would like to restore the old balance and regain control over what it sees as its lost territories. However, it is considerably weaker than during the Cold War and has had limited success in its efforts to do so. It is uncertain whether and to what degree today's revanchist Russia is bound by the unwritten rules that created stability during the Cold War.⁶⁴

Although Russia wishes to present the ongoing battle as one between two great powers it is facing strong resistance from the countries concerned

the ongoing battle as one between two great powers – Russia and the US – it is, in fact, facing strong resistance from the countries concerned, as well as from the EU and more broadly the “collective West”. Contrary to the Russian claims that the US is imposing its views on Allies, smaller states in Europe – especially the ones located close to Russia – have an existential interest in defending the rules-based order and maintaining US commitment to European security. It is noteworthy that no European country wishes to belong to the Russian sphere of influence.

- **Thirdly, the current revisionist aspirations of Russia have not only broken the European order but also brought into question the credibility and sustainability of the UN-based global order,** no matter how imperfect it always was. If flagrant violations of core security norms by a member of the UN Security Council go unpunished, further violations by other powers grow more likely and erosion of the system seems unavoidable.

⁶⁴ Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, “[What If the War in Ukraine Spins Out of Control?](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, 19 July 2022.

- Fourth, the global context is different in other important ways. **The main systemic competitor of the US is China – not Russia. Yet the world order is not bipolar – there are multiple centres of power**, arguably constituting a multi-order world.⁶⁵ The existence of not just competing centres of power but competing regional orders built around these centres unavoidably complicates efforts to maintain a global agreement on basic security norms as defined in the UN Charter. Europe is no longer the central arena of great power competition, the focus of which has been moving to the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, Europe has become a stronger actor in its own right, although it remains closely tied to the transatlantic alliance and dependent on the US for its security.

The existence of not just competing centres of power but competing regional orders built around these centres unavoidably complicates efforts to maintain a global agreement on basic security norms

- Finally, **in contrast to the very limited connections between Cold War blocs, there is a high degree of interdependence between the competing centres of power.** At the same time, the post-Cold War era belief in the positive impact of interdependence on global security and prosperity has given way to an understanding that interdependence creates not only tensions and vulnerabilities but even conflicts.⁶⁶ The invasion of Ukraine has made western Europeans believe what their allies in CEE were insisting on all along: namely that Russia has been using connections, notably energy trade, as a tool of geopolitical influence. Europe has been remarkably successful in decoupling from Russian energy sources, but efforts to cut off the Russian economy from the

global market through sanctions have had a more limited effect.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION: THREE SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE

In the broader global framework of uncertainty and change, it is likely that the struggle over the future European security order will continue

The struggle over the future European security order will continue until one or the other side is too exhausted to continue

until one or the other side is too exhausted to continue. One can envisage the following three basic scenarios after the war in Ukraine, with the two first ones based on the assumption that there will be no principled change in Russia's vision of European security, and the third one – more idealistic but unfortunately less likely – predicated on a radical change inside Russia.

- **European security will be defined by a dual order with a limited Russian sphere of influence.** A possible and perhaps most likely outcome is a new balance of power, with the liberal rules-based order further strengthened among Western countries, while Russia will be forced to accept a new de facto sphere of influence that is geographically much more limited than the former Soviet or tsarist empires. The EU and NATO, remaining the main pillars of the European order, will enlarge to countries that wish to join and meet the conditions. Ideally (1a), the new balance will entail the complete restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity. However (1b), it can also emerge in a situation where part of Ukrainian territory remains occupied for years or even decades. (Remember the decades-long occupation of the Baltic states, which was not de jure recognised by the West,

⁶⁵ Trine Flockhart and Elena Korosteleva, "[War in Ukraine: Putin and the Multi-Order World](#)," *Contemporary Security Policy* Vol. 43, Issue 3 (2022): 466-81.

⁶⁶ Mark Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict* (Transworld Digital, 2021).

⁶⁷ Alexandra Prokopenko, "[How Sanctions Have Changed Russian Economic Policy](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 9 May 2023; Michael Weiss, "[Short circuit. How Europe turns a blind eye to Russia smuggling dual-use microchips](#)," *The Insider*, 21 August 2023.

or the Cold War division of Germany and creation of the Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic, which was not de jure recognised by the Federal Republic of Germany and its allies). Hence, the disintegration of the Russian empire may be prolonged for many more decades.

- **A new order based on a realist balance of power emerges, with Russia regaining parts of its sphere of influence.** In this scenario, the West would experience a collapse of the existing liberal rules-based order as a result of a change of power in a major western country or another significant shock. This may happen if the next presidential election in the US is won by Donald Trump or another similar candidate who may profoundly undermine democracy in the US and/or American commitments to NATO, European security, and the rules-based international order. Putin is, in fact, hoping for such a scenario and trying to prolong the war of attrition in Ukraine until the time when US support would erode and Russia's chances for victory would improve. Radical populist forces may also gain power in Europe, which could weaken Western unity and support for Ukraine and undermine both NATO and the EU. The collapse of NATO and/or the EU might turn into a fatal blow to the western liberal order as we know it. So far, however, the two organisations have proved to be adaptive to shifts in the geopolitical environment, as well as domestic changes in member states; thus, it is not beyond imagination that they would survive a radical populist leader in a major member state. This assumption is supported by the case of Italy: despite radical right-wing populists leading the government since October 2022, the country's policy towards Ukraine has not seen a substantial shift. Similarly, a second Trump presidency might continue US support to Ukraine so as to avoid a major defeat to Russia.
- **The rules-based order in Europe prevails and is adopted by Russia.** This is the most idealist and, at least in the short to medium term, most unlikely scenario. It may occur if Russia is clearly defeated in Ukraine,

experiences radical domestic change, takes responsibility for the war crimes it has committed in Ukraine, and defines a profoundly new course and model for its development. However, Russia's development after the Cold War suggests that even a radical domestic change and collapse of the Kremlin's external influence

Russia's development after the Cold War suggests that even a radical domestic change and collapse of the Kremlin's external influence do not alter the ideational basis of its policy

do not necessarily alter the deeper ideational basis of its foreign and security policy (notably a realist understanding of its great power status and sphere of influence). The security services have maintained a strong grip on the country's foreign policy since the early days of the USSR; without a fundamental change in both the society and the security apparatus, any domestic political change is unlikely to take the shape of a long-lasting systemic transformation. Furthermore, Russia today lacks any viable political alternatives to the current regime, and those that do exist are either unknown to the domestic audience or have limited popularity.⁶⁸ It is also questionable whether the opposition that does exist is actually willing to undertake the kind of political reforms necessary to truly change Russia. The West can increase

The ability of the West to directly influence Russia's domestic development is very limited

the likelihood of this scenario, above all, by helping Ukraine to win the war and making Russia bear responsibility for its war crimes. The ability of the West to directly influence Russia's domestic development is very limited.

The West would be well advised to treat the first scenario as the most likely one. Defeat in Ukraine – albeit necessary – might not be sufficient to lead Russia to the conclusion that it cannot benefit from further aggression and

⁶⁸ The most well-known opposition figure being Aleksey Navalny, whose level of approval was at 19-20 % in 2020-2021, see: ["The return of Aleksey Navalny,"](#) Levada, 8 February 2021.

should reconsider the very fundamental ideas of its foreign policy. As long as the worldview that underlies Russia's foreign policy does not change, any new balance of power will be temporary and under threat of renewed aggression once Russia has regained strength. In order to make it more sustainable, the West would need to ensure credible deterrence and defence, as well as consistently weaken Russia's ability to rebuild its military might.

It is in the interest of the West not to allow Russia to impose its sphere of influence on any country. Knowing Russia's plainly expressed ambitions, it would not be content with subordinating any single country; success in one country would encourage it to proceed elsewhere to other "lost territories" that Russia considers its own. Russia has to be forced to accept a new balance of power that does justice to the sovereignty of its neighbours. No country should be left in a grey zone between Russia and the West against its will. Being in a grey zone has proven to be not a way to increase stability but an invitation for Russia to strengthen its control through

Ukraine's full integration into NATO and the EU will be crucial for building sustainable security in Europe and will require a serious commitment

malign influence, destabilisation, and in some cases use of force. Ukraine's full integration into NATO and the EU will be crucial for building sustainable security in Europe and will require a serious commitment from both organisations to a years-long accession process.

One of the lessons learned from the Russian aggression is that political and economic relations are closely interlinked, but not in the way Western countries previously assumed. Decision-makers must learn from the mistakes of the post-Cold War era and avoid recreating unhealthy economic dependencies. They should avoid placing themselves once again in a position where influenced by economic interests, they become vulnerable to Russian political influence. Western businesses should be dissuaded from returning to Russia before thorough societal changes have

occurred. Companies may be learning this lesson in any case, as they have been reminded in a harsh manner that property rights are not safeguarded in Russia and there is no rule of law to protect them. Premature normalisation of economic ties must not be allowed to legitimise Russia's imperialist ambitions since this would push Europe towards another conflict.

Premature normalisation of economic ties must not be allowed to legitimise Russia's imperialist ambitions since this would push Europe towards another conflict

Trust between the West and Russia has been destroyed and will not easily be restored. Even after the war, Russia cannot be trusted to respect its international commitments and agreed norms. However, an aspiration to rebuild a common framework of norms and institutions is likely to re-emerge on both sides after the war, provided there is a change of power in Russia. While an attempt to restore a mutual commitment to basic security norms – such as the resolution of conflicts by peaceful means and respect for internationally acknowledged state borders – is desirable, it is important to avoid repeating the wishful thinking of the post-Cold War era. Lack of trust will unavoidably overshadow future efforts to engage with Russia on arms control. It is important not to allow Russia to instrumentalise negotiations on arms control in order to weaken western defence and deterrence or gain concessions regarding the core principles of the European security order.⁶⁹ Western policies need to be built on

It is important not to allow Russia to instrumentalise negotiations on arms control in order to weaken western defence and deterrence or gain concessions

a realistic assessment of Russia's self-defined security interests and the limits that western-Russian disagreements on the European security order impose on mutual commitments and cooperation. The most important means

⁶⁹ Tõnis Idarand, Kalev Stoicescu, and Ian Anthony, *The Future of Arms Control: Ready to (Dis)Agree?* May (Tallinn: ICDS, 2023).

to prevent the return of war and build stability will be credible deterrence and defence, supported by western unity on major strategic matters. Furthermore, clear communication with adversaries will be essential to reduce the risk of the kind of misjudgements that paved the way to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine underscores the linkages between European security and the Indo-Pacific

Looking beyond Europe, the ramifications of Russian-western relations and the lessons learned from past mistakes have implications for Europe's engagement with China and the Indo-Pacific. The war in Ukraine underscores the linkages between European security and the Indo-Pacific. The Chinese political and economic support to the Russian war effort, although not without limits, is in contradiction to the western aim of protecting the liberal rules-based order. The partnership between Russia and China is motivated by their shared interest to bring an end to US hegemony and promote a world order that protects authoritarian rule.⁷⁰ If Russia's efforts to restore its sphere of influence by use of force were successful, this would increase the risk of China resorting to military force in pursuit of its geopolitical goals. The war in Ukraine has

also created a completely new potential for Chinese involvement in the future of European security – i.e., engaging as a partner of Russia in future peace negotiations. In this global context, Europeans should not only insist on continued engagement of the US in Europe but also strengthen their ability to defend themselves while contributing to the US-led efforts to uphold deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.⁷¹

Coming back to Russian-western relations, although a new balance resembling the Cold War is often described in negative terms, it would undoubtedly be a better option for European states and citizens than the current hot war. It could also be more sustainable than illusionary efforts to build a common order with Russia. As long as Russia does not profoundly change, a more proactive containment policy – centred on the Russian Federation within its internationally recognised borders – can help its neighbours protect themselves against aggression and malign influence. Furthermore, the establishment of a geographically new line of containment might push Russia towards domestic change in the long run, however unlikely it might seem right now. After all, the clear distinction between East and West played a major role in setting the stage for the USSR's collapse.

⁷⁰ Una Berzina-Cerenkova and Tim Rühlig, "[China's Complex Relations with Russia: Tracing the Limits of a 'Limitless Friendship'.](#)" *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 12 September 2023.

⁷¹ Luis Simón, Daniel Fiott, and Octavian Manea, "[Two Fronts, One Goal: Euro-Atlantic Security in the Indo-Pacific Age.](#)" *The Marathon Initiative*, August 2023.

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