

# The War against Ukraine and the Global Power Structure

## Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine means a rupture of the European and global security order with long-term consequences. It leads to a renaissance of NATO and transatlantic relations while Russia is increasingly aligning itself with China, albeit as a mere junior partner. This reinforces the trend toward the formation of a global bipolarity with Washington and Beijing as centers. In Europe, a new Eastern Shield is formed consisting of Ukraine, Poland, Sweden and Finland, the Baltic Sea becomes de facto NATO's internal sea and changes the geostrategic constellation in northern Europe. Poland becomes Washington's new preferred partner due to its geostrategic position and its willingness to invest in security policy.

## Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 shook the foundation of politics, business, the military and society in Europe in equal measure. Although the outbreak of fighting in Donbass and the occupation of Crimea in 2014 was clearly seen in the West as an act defying international law, it was to a certain extent politically tolerated; there was no fundamental strategic upheaval in relations with Russia. The West, on the other hand, experienced the invasion of 2022 as a blatant breach of the European security order and as a threat to the security and stability of the entire continent. This led to a political and economic reaction from the EU member states, which for the first time was quicker and more comprehensive than by the USA. Ukraine itself developed an unexpectedly high readiness to defend itself under President Zelensky. The country defended the capital Kiev with great strategic and tactical competence and subsequently managed to recapture the second largest city of Kharkiv and all parts of the Cherson

Oblast west of the Dnieper River. The USA and Europe are supporting Ukraine financially, as well as with armament and information, while avoiding direct involvement in any combat operations.

Future accession to the EU was promised. The relationship between the Union and the West as a whole with Russia has been permanently damaged. Europe is reducing its political and economic ties with, and in particular its energy dependency on, Russia to an absolute minimum for the foreseeable future. The invasion has led to a renaissance of NATO and with it a striking deepening of transatlantic relations. Russia's self-isolation from Europe and its increased reliance on China are changing global power structures. Even if the invasion were to end soon, a sustained and extremely difficult post-war period between Russia and the West can be expected.

## Europe's New Eastern Shield

The Russian imperialism that has recently come to light has led to a significantly more intense and broader perception of the threat by the European population, to increased defence efforts by the states and to new security and power structures for Europe and the global order.

In response to the Ukraine invasion, a new Eastern Shield forms in Europe. This is essentially formed by the four states of Ukraine, Poland, Sweden, and Finland (with a supplementary function by Romania). It stretches from the Scandinavian Northern Cape region to the Sea of Azov and has an area of 1.7 million square kilometres and a population of almost 100 million people. The four states show a high level of threat and danger awareness in respect to the traditional Russian willingness to expand aggressively, as well as a high willingness to oppose it in the event of an attack. Together they have sufficient military

capabilities to repel conventional threats from the Russian side.

According to the Ukrainian Defence Minister, Ukraine has around 700,000 soldiers under arms and has impressively demonstrated its high military potential and extraordinary strategic and tactical skills in the course of the war so far, despite the fact that there is still a blatant weakness in equipment.<sup>1</sup> With a spending limit of 4% of GNP, Poland is setting new standards among European NATO members.<sup>2</sup> It is in the process of increasing its land, sea and air forces to the order of 300,000 men, making it the largest EU army. Although Sweden and Finland have only relatively small active manpower, they have hundreds of thousands of highly trained and equipped reserve troops who can be mobilized quickly and efficiently in the event of an attack, as well as excellent capacities in the field of combat aircraft, main battle tanks, heavy artillery and other, for conventional conflicts necessary, military equipment. In the event of an attack, these four states could collectively mobilize more than a million soldiers within a short space of time.

## The Baltic Sea as a NATO Internal Sea

The war against Ukraine triggered the NATO accession process of Sweden and Finland. Within a few weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the willingness to join NATO has increased from around a third of the population to over 70% in both Nordic countries.<sup>3</sup>

Sweden has decided to end its 200-year neutrality. Finland, which was the only state of the former tsarist empire to be able to permanently break away from the immediate Russian-Soviet sphere of influence after the First World War, but which was still politically close to Moscow during the Cold War, referred to as "Finlandizati-

on”, is following this path together Sweden. Admission to NATO, which was decided by the governments of both countries and is implemented with NATO but currently still being hampered by a veto by Turkey, is changing the strategic situation in the north of the continent considerably. With the accession of the two Nordic countries, the Baltic Sea will de facto become a NATO internal sea. During the Cold War, NATO’s transit control between the North and Baltic Seas, which was limited to the Skagerrak between Norway and Denmark, is being extended to the entire Baltic Sea region. Even to the Baltic Sea, Russia only has the narrow access to the Gulf of Finland near Saint Petersburg and from the enclave of Kaliningrad between Poland and Lithuania. The former Russian maritime dominance of the Baltic Sea finally comes to an end – Europe’s north is dominated by NATO. This change also brings new terrestrial and nuclear-strategic perspectives.

Finland’s geostrategic location results in increased access control to Russia’s second largest city, Saint Petersburg, and for the Russian armed forces stationed in this area. The increased observation and control options of the Alliance with regard to Murmansk, the only year-round ice-free port in the Arctic Sea, and the Kola Peninsula, which is important for Russia’s nuclear forces, will have similar, if not greater, geostrategic importance in the future. The main Russian submarine base is located here. The submarine fleet is highly relevant for the second-strike capability of the Russian nuclear forces (about two thirds of the total Russian capacity<sup>4</sup>). Finland’s 1,340-kilometer-long border with Russia offers numerous opportunities to obstruct the supply of maritime and nuclear forces on the Kola Peninsula from the heartland of Russia in the event of a conflict.

### Poland as the Security Centre of Europe

The central geographic location in the area of the European front-line states places Poland geostrategically in the centre of the new European Eastern Shield. Poland is a direct neighbour of Ukraine, Belarus, the Russian oblast of Kaliningrad, and the Baltic States, and borders the Baltic Sea.

Poland forms the logistical and political hub for the EU and NATO in the course of the war against Ukraine. Warsaw’s investment in the country’s military capabilities already places the Polish army at the forefront of European nations in terms of troop strength and general conventional military capabilities. This brings about a significant role change in the transatlantic configuration: Warsaw will become Washington’s preferred security policy contact and cooperation partner on the European continent. Germany is losing its geopolitical and geostrategic centrality in Europe for the first time in its history, not least due to its refusal to play a leading role in security policy and the permanent neglect and underfunding of the Bundeswehr. The Federal Republic runs the risk of becoming a strategic hinterland with negative overall political and economic consequences.

On the one hand, Poland’s new leadership role promises new dynamics for the continent’s security and defence policy. At the same time, however, it harbours the risk of losing the broader European ability to act in other security areas and the danger of “old” and “new” Europe political drifting apart. The relationship between the right-wing conservative Kaczynski-line of the Polish government and the EU institutions has already been exposed to numerous strains that could only be bridged with great effort and in a makeshift manner. In addition, most of Poland’s defence program is acquired outside of Europe: Poland is currently buying \$5.8 billion worth of tanks, artillery and fighter jets from South Korea and plans to set up manufacturing facilities for South Korean defence equipment in Poland.<sup>5</sup> This makes Warsaw a potential anchor for increased Atlantic-Pacific cooperation, but has a negative effect as the already fragmented European armaments market is further split up and thus structurally weakened.

### Neo-Ottoman Great Power Politics

In recent years, Turkey has become a decisive political and military factor in the crisis regions of Libya, Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Syria. Turkey’s neo-Ottoman foreign policy, initiated under Erdogan, is based

on a Turkish-national component as well as a Sunni-religious and a restorative-imperial component. Target areas of the neo-Ottoman great power politics are the Balkans, the Caucasus region, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. They have a high degree of overlap with the most important target areas of European security policy, but also with Russian great power policy.

Erdogan uses this circumstance to further develop an independent actor role between the West and Russia. In recent years, Turkey has become noticeably more distant from the EU, the USA and NATO, while at the same time moving closer to Russia (e.g., the purchase of S400 missile defence systems)<sup>6</sup> and China (particular the commitment to the Belt and Road Initiative)<sup>7</sup>. This positioning is further reinforced by the war against Ukraine. Ankara assumed an intermediary role between Russia and Ukraine, which is not only limited to facilitating direct contacts to secure grain exports from both countries through the Black Sea; it supplied Ukraine with drones, blocked passage through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles for Russian and Western warships and issued a (temporary) veto against Sweden’s accession to NATO.

Turkey is fully aware of its key strategic position in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea regions and of its indispensable military role in the Caucasus and the Middle East. On the one hand, it has the protective umbrella of NATO, and, on the other hand, it has its own political, economic, cultural, and in particular military strength. Their importance will increase even more with regard to the future military security of Central Asia in the face of a resurgent Russia.

In any case, the European Union must reshape its relationship with Turkey, which has been badly damaged since the failure of the accession process, with or without Erdogan. Considering the impact of the war against Ukraine on the global power structure between the five potentially largest global players reveals significant changes. Those most affected and suffering the most are Russia and the EU/Europe.

## Russia

The war against Ukraine has led to a blatant loss of face for Russia in terms of its most important world power component, having been seen as the strongest military power after the USA. Russia will likely have to end this war without significant territorial gains. Its military invasion of Ukraine is not only carried out with the most powerful parts of his regular army and mobilization of hundreds of thousands of recruits, but also with the help and support of private military organizations such as the combat group Wagner. At least in the medium term, this will lead to reduced engagement in Russia's other foreign policy target areas. The expansion of the Wagner combat group led by Yevgeny Prigozhin to an estimated 50,000 men must be seen as a real risk factor for international security policy for the period after the war against Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> The experience gained so far in North and Central Africa calls for the development of efficient counter-concepts within the framework of a European security policy.

The self-isolation of Russia from the rest of Europe caused by the war against Ukraine leads to the loss of its most important sales markets, especially in oil and gas, and to a radical dismantling of technology partnerships with Western companies. This forces a stronger political and economic affinity with China, albeit in the clear position as a junior partner with an increasing tendency towards mere vassalage.

## European Union

Alongside Russia – and of course Ukraine – the EU is affected most by the war against Ukraine. The lack of cheap energy, at least in the medium term for the period of war and subsequent normalization period, the loss of by far the largest neighbouring market, the high costs to be expected in the reconstruction of Ukraine, and the increased military expenditure for the necessary rearmament, are burdening the economic strength of the Union and thus its current one main strength as a potential global player.

The war against Ukraine has fully demonstrated Europe's security policy dependence on the United States. European security and defence policy is shaped within the framework of US-led NATO. As a result of Sweden and Finland joining NATO, only the small, militarily insignificant island states of Cyprus, Malta, and Ireland, as well as neutral Austria remain outside the alliance. The transatlantic alliance with a US security umbrella for Europe, which was called into question under President Trump, is experiencing a renaissance. Within the alliance however, the establishment of a common European pillar is more distant than ever. Furthermore, European security and stability interests in North Africa and the Middle East run the risk of not being adequately taken into account. The EU remains a gridlocked player on the global stage.

## India

India remains neutral in this conflict. Its historical friendship with Russia but also its rivalry with China and the resulting willingness to cooperate with the USA in the Indo-Pacific suggest that it will continue on its independent line. Its potential, which is still in need of development in many dimensions, is currently and in the medium term not sufficient for a larger independent role within the global power structure.

## USA

In the war against Ukraine, the USA impressively confirmed their position as No. 1 in terms of global power politics. Months before the war broke out, they had demonstrated their superior information advantage by making accurate predictions about the impending invasion of Russia that most Europeans doubted.<sup>9</sup> During the war it showcased the superiority and quality over the global No. 2 military power, Russia, through the supplied weapons systems and the advice on military tactics and targeting. The war against Ukraine is weakening what the US sees as the only military power in the world that currently poses a real threat to America. Russia's military aggression strengthens transatlantic

relations and reinforces the full leadership of the United States in the Western world and beyond.

## China

So far, the People's Republic of China has remained widely militarily neutral in relation to the war. China is benefiting to a large extent politically, economically, and militarily from the fact that the world's largest territorial state is leaning towards China as a result of Russia's self-isolation. The Middle Kingdom receives a battle-hardened partner dependent on it for the struggle for the global No. 1 position. However, the extent to which Russia will remain a reliable partner in the long term must be seriously questioned.

Serious negative effects of the war are the solidarity between Moscow and Beijing and, as a result, the emergence of a triple alliance that has been expanded to include Teheran. This is causing the emergence of a firm anti-US political-military axis of resistance, increased resource control by anti-Western powers, and new opportunities for cooperation between China and Russia in the Arctic. The intensive preoccupation with the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is to be expected for years to come, limits the full concentration on the absolutely priority dispute with China. The re-intensified transatlantic relations on the one hand and the strengthened Russian-Chinese relations on the other hand have boosted the emergence of a new global bipolarity.

## New Bipolarity

The beginning of a polarization between democratic and authoritarian systems, which was already discernible before the war against Ukraine, is being intensified by both sides. This leads de facto to a global constellation and confrontation between West and anti-West with the simultaneous formation of a neutral to neutralist group of states, primarily from the area of developing countries with a geo-strategic focus on Africa, Latin America, and West Asia. For the latter, India has leadership ambitions, similar to the situation in the so-called Third

World during the Cold War period. The Western Group includes Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and the East Asian countries of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Its members all have high technological, industrial and cultural capacities.

The new anti-Western political alliance, based on personal and contractual agreements between the heads of state of China, Russia, and Iran, brings synergy effects that should not be underestimated in terms of their overall political, economic, and military capabilities. It is already having a short-term strategic effect in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) and in Central Asia, but also in sub-Saharan Africa, and offers new opportunities for using global commodity markets as a political weapon. China already owns more than half of global production in 9 of 14 raw material categories that are particularly important for modern technologies (gallium, mercury, tungsten, bismuth, graphite, antimony, rare earths, tellurium and vanadium).<sup>10</sup> It also owns or controls a large number of raw material sources in Africa, Latin America, and Australia. This can result in supply dependencies and price disadvantages for Western demand and production capacities. With Russia's self-isolation from the West, access to other important resources such as wood, steel, copper, and especially in the energy sector with oil and natural gas can potentially be restricted for Western states and companies.

## Outlook for Europe

The war against Ukraine is Europe's greatest political, economic, and military challenge since the end of the Cold War. Its effects require a new understanding of roles and a common will to act, especially between Paris and Berlin. Efforts to establish or create European defence autonomy, or defence sovereignty, must be put on the back burner for the time being. The emergence of the new Eastern Shield and Poland's new central position highlight the mental conflict between the frontline states, which have a high level of threat awareness, and the consensus-oriented,

hesitant, leading powers Germany and France. The danger of a rift developing between the more Atlantic-oriented states of Northern and Eastern Europe and the Eurocentric states of Western and Southern Europe must not be underestimated. The debate on the EU's integration and enlargement will be influenced and shaped by the promise of accession to Ukraine and the reinvigorated accession processes for the five Western Balkan states.

For Europe, the war in Ukraine means there is an increased need to differentiate between defence policy and other security policies. Through the four main carriers of the new Eastern Shield, the former receives a renewed indispensability of the nuclear protective shield of the USA, as well as a long-term effective, dominant function of NATO under US leadership in the context of European politics. This suggests that the Northern and Eastern EU members plus Great Britain and Norway will be even more oriented towards Washington.

The USA's focus on the Pacific and the necessary concentration of NATO on a revisionist Russia, while Germany and France lose importance for European defence at the same time, can also become an opportunity for a new approach to European security policy. The role of Germany and France, alongside Poland in relation to the new Eastern Shield, will depend to a large extent on the scope defined by Washington, but at least as much will depend on the joint creative will and increased military capacity to act on the part of Berlin, Paris, and Brussels. Within the EU framework, this requires the Weimar Triangle between Paris, Berlin, and Warsaw, which has so far been of little importance, to be turned into a defence policy coordination forum. In any case, there is increased pressure on Germany and France to develop a common European armaments market.

The pacification of the Balkans and the stabilization of the European environment, in the South and South-east of the continent, remain tasks of the highest priority for the European Union, with Germany and France as its leading powers.

The instability of the entire terrestrial environment of Europe leads to serious impairments for the economic and socio-cultural development potential of the continent. The lack of a stable neighbourhood has particularly serious effects on long-term economic development and thus core competence of the EU. Stabilization efforts for the geostrategic environment in Africa and the Middle East are not being politically competed by Washington, but at most by Moscow and Beijing, and require stronger cooperation, new initiatives, and further steps towards integration between Brussels and the EU capitals. After the failure of France's post-colonial Africa policy and the growing realization in Berlin that quasi-pacifism has no capacity for a solution, a strong new joint approach by Germany and France is needed. A Berlin-Paris-Warsaw-Rome-Madrid pentagonal could subsequently become crucial. A new, serious initiative for a common security policy is a prerequisite for the long-term creation of a common EU pillar within NATO and for attaining a global player role. It is a prerequisite for the future relevance of Europe.

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Layout: Medienbüro Meyer