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From the Ukraine Conflict to a Secure Europe

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 put an end to European security as a cooperative project. That project was grounded in the so-called Helsinki Decalogue, a declaration within the 1975 Helsinki Final Act that laid out agreed principles of conduct between the West and the Soviet bloc.¹ In the years and decades that followed, European security grew in complexity and scope, especially after the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union. Arms control agreements, institutional arrangements between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia, and the agencies of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) gave an ever denser structure to the security order. That order has collapsed. European security needs now to be reimagined and rebuilt during what promises to be a prolonged period of Russian hostility and obstructionism.

In this time of great uncertainty, the natural tendency is to defer long-term planning for Europe's future security and focus on managing urgent matters—particularly as the war in Ukraine rages, governments struggle against “Ukraine fatigue” among their publics, and Ukraine's battlefield fortunes wane. When the West believes that the goal should be Russia's strategic failure lest it press further westward into Europe, a dispassionate discussion of future security arrangements is difficult to conduct.

Absent long-term planning, however, the future unfolds as the outcome of disparate measures taken for tactical reasons rather than as a matter of strategic design. This approach will yield a suboptimal arrangement for European security. The United States and its allies and partners need a strategic vision for the future around which to coordinate policies and operations in the years ahead. Even if the vision never fully materializes, as unforeseen contingencies inevitably intervene and force course corrections, it will lend purpose to current choices.

The West pursued an alluring vision of a Europe whole, free, prosperous, and at peace as the Cold War drew to a close, but that vision is at best a distant one today: Russia's authoritarian regime, aggression against Ukraine, and broader hostility toward the West preclude it. Nevertheless, a free, prosperous, and secure Europe (including Ukraine) within a NATO-EU framework beyond Russia's borders with beneficial trade and investment ties with Russia, capable of responsibly managing geopolitical competition, is a vision that is imaginable, achievable, and adequate for U.S. interests. A strong deterrence and defense posture could maintain an uneasy peace, with the hope that arms control agreements and consultative forums would eventually reduce the costs of maintaining peace and ease tension along the NATO-Russia frontier stretching from the Barents Sea through the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Restored diplomatic, commercial, cultural, and scientific relations with Russia—even if less robust than in the past—would be mutually beneficial.

This vision emerges from a clear-eyed assessment of the present challenges to European security. These challenges shape the security requirements for specific states that the new order has to factor in. They also suggest the institutional designs needed to advance security and stability across the continent. This strategic vision makes it possible to identify the concrete tasks and develop a plan of action that moves Europe from managing the current conflict toward a new and viable security arrangement in the years ahead.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION AND THE MAIN PLAYERS

Europe's foremost unresolved challenge has not changed for at least the past two hundred years: managing relations with Russia, its huge, often unruly neighbor to the east, which is alien in spirit yet integral to the continent's security. Since the late nineteenth century, that challenge has centered on Ukraine. The Donbas region, which lies at the heart of Russia's current war against Ukraine, was the Russian Empire's sole industrial zone at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries; without it, Russia arguably would not have remained a great power. After the October Revolution of 1917 and the Russian Civil War, the Donbas became a critical component of the Soviet military-industrial complex. Russian rulers have long considered Ukraine critical to creating the strategic depth on which their country, situated on a vast plain with no formidable physical obstacles against powerful rivals to the west, depends for security.

Russia's rulers saw the rise of Ukrainian nationalism and concomitant aspirations for an independent state as a severe security threat—one that simultaneously offered Western leaders a way to undercut the menace they saw as emanating from Russia. Viewed in this light, the current conflict is not simply a matter of Ukraine's sovereignty and right to choose its alliances, as Western leaders assert; at its core, it embodies the question of Russian power and how that power is deployed in Europe.

Today, the central question for the West is how to manage relations between Russia and Ukraine to constrain Russian power. The West's ability to do so effectively will depend in large measure on the degree of unity among European states and the extent and credibility of the U.S. commitment to its transatlantic partners. If this is the basic equation, the question remains: What then does the West need to understand about Russia and Ukraine—and about itself—to advance its interests vis-à-vis Russia?

Russia

Resolution of the war in Ukraine will not end the confrontation between Russia and the West. As Russian President Vladimir Putin made clear in his annual address to the Federal Assembly in February 2024, Russia is engaged in a long hybrid war to undermine the West's dominant role in the international system.² Russia remains a part of Europe culturally, but it has broken from the West politically for at least the next generation. Although Putin himself has been the driving force behind this break, it enjoys broad elite support, fueled by resentment that the West refused to accept Russia into its fold despite what Russians view as their earnest efforts to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community in the first post-Cold War decades.

Three developments that could change this assessment—a democratic breakthrough, Russia's breakup, or its economic collapse—remain unlikely. In the past few years, the Kremlin has systematically dismantled the democratic opposition. Its most prominent leader, Aleksei Navalny, died in a Russian prison camp, the victim of Putin's malevolence if not his direct order. Other leaders are sitting in prison or in exile. Opposition forces in the diaspora, divided among themselves, exercise next to no influence on developments inside Russia. More important, there is no significant elite or popular demand for Western-style democracy: public opinion surveys demonstrate that Russians are comfortable with a strong, authoritarian leader as a bulwark against external enemies and internal chaos.³

Likewise, a breakup of the Russian Federation is improbable. Unlike the Soviet Union in its death throes, Russia today is held together by powerful centripetal forces, including patriotism, xenophobia, and a ruling elite that wants to draw on the resources of the entire country for its own purposes. In

addition, Russia has a solid ethnic core: Russians account for 70 to 75 percent of the total population, and they are the dominant ethnic group in most of the country's eighty-three provinces, including those that are nominally homelands of other ethnic groups.⁴ (These figures exclude the five regions of Ukraine that Russia has illegally annexed.) Modern history offers no examples of an ethnically homogenous state breaking up for internal reasons or under external pressure.

Last, the Russian economy is not on the verge of collapse, even if Russia is in secular decline. Sanctions have not had the crippling effects the West anticipated. Indeed, in 2023, Russia's economy grew by 3 to 4 percent, and a 2 to 3 percent expansion is projected for 2024.⁵ To be sure, the country faces challenges that, left unresolved, will constrain future growth, including a declining population, lagging educational standards, and underinvestment in cutting-edge technologies.⁶ Even so, gradual decline is a more likely scenario than abrupt collapse. Meanwhile, the Kremlin will almost certainly retain sufficient capacity to mobilize the country's resources for its own purposes, enabling it to continue to punch above its weight on the global stage as it has in recent decades.

Barring extraordinary developments, Russia will thus remain what it has been throughout history: a country with an authoritarian political system driven by an expansionist impulse, lagging economically and technologically behind the world's leading powers yet determined to remain one of them (even at the cost of extraordinary sacrifice). For the foreseeable future, it will retain imposing military capabilities—including one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals and world-class space and cyber assets—as well as highly capable conventional forces, once reconstituted.

Moreover, Russia's so-called pivot to the East will heighten its challenge to European security. The accelerating reorientation of Russian trade eastward (largely, toward China) and toward the Global South has allowed it to become less economically intertwined with Europe than ever before in the post-Soviet period. In these conditions, Russia can act more aggressively against Europe without running the same risk to its economy as during the first year of its war against Ukraine. The punitive levers that Europe has at its disposal to moderate Russian behavior are losing their potency.

Ukraine

As Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stresses, the war is existential for Ukraine. Depending on its outcome, the country could cease to exist as an independent state, absorbed *de jure* into the Russian Federation or reorganized as a protectorate. If Ukraine manages to thwart Russia's designs and survives as an independent state, the war will determine how much of the territory within its internationally recognized 1991 borders remains under Kyiv's control. The war's length and intensity will determine its ultimate costs, both human and material, as well as the cost of postwar reconstruction. Whether the millions of Ukrainians who fled the country to Russia and other European nations during the conflict will return in large numbers remains to be seen, but certainly, the longer the war rages, the fewer will ultimately return.

At the same time, the crucible of war has forged a strong sense of national identity. It has produced a profound and enduring alienation from Russia and reinforced the country's European aspirations.⁷ Nonetheless, Ukraine's integration into the West is not a foregone conclusion. To join the European Union (EU), it will have to undergo a dramatic socioeconomic and political transformation, uprooting deeply entrenched corruption and forestalling the reemergence of the oligarchic system that stymied economic growth and democratic development after its independence in 1991. A prolonged period of

martial law will complicate the building of a strong democratic polity. The burdens of economic recovery will test social cohesion as various groups and localities compete for scarce resources.

Despite these uncertainties, Ukrainians expect to be welcomed into the West out of gratitude for their immense sacrifices in, as they see it, the defense of the West against Russian aggression. They believe that they have earned the right to security guarantees from key Western countries in the short run and eventual membership in NATO down the road. They also expect to be put on a fast track to EU accession. If progress toward membership in these two principal European institutions stalls, the danger could arise that Ukrainians will turn against the West out of resentment. Instead of a Ukraine anchored in the West, the country could emerge as a proud, nationalist, and embittered state, unmoored and floating between Europe and Russia.

Regardless of Ukraine's postconflict trajectory, it will remain an object of Russian desire, viewed by Moscow as critical to Russian security, prosperity, and national identity. How far the Kremlin will go to return an independent Ukraine to its orbit remains to be seen, but military force, political and economic subversion, and economic coercion will all remain on the table. Put simply, the Kremlin will be loath to let Ukrainians live in peace outside of Russia.

Europe

Europe has been shocked out of its geopolitical slumber by two developments: Russia's massive invasion of Ukraine and the possibility that Donald Trump will return as the U.S. president. The former convinced European leaders that they had to take security more seriously. Finland and Sweden abandoned their traditional neutrality to join NATO. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz declared a *Zeitenwende*, a major shift in German policy promising a significant increase in defense spending, and other European countries followed suit. During 2024, twenty-two of NATO's thirty European members are expected to meet the goal of spending 2 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense (which only two met in 2014, when NATO leaders committed to achieving that goal).⁸

Meanwhile, the possibility of Trump's reelection has raised the specter of Europe having to provide for its defense on its own. Trump has flaunted his disdain for NATO, warning that as president, he would not honor the Article 5 guarantee of collective security with regard to countries that had failed to pay their "dues."⁹ Currently, Europe is in no position to defend itself. Comfortable in its reliance on the United States as its security guarantor after the Cold War, it allowed its military forces and defense industries to atrophy to devote greater resources to raising standards of living. As a result, European military forces cannot effectively operate without direction and material support from the United States. (Recall Washington's rescue of the flailing European-led intervention against Muammar al-Qaddafi's Libya in 2011.)

Trump's shadow has thus lent urgency to Europe's mission to achieve strategic autonomy. It would be wrong, however, to believe that if Trump fails to win reelection, Europe could rest easy, confident of the United States' long-term commitment to its security. Even American champions of transatlantic ties concede that mounting challenges to the United States elsewhere in the world—particularly from China—along with limited U.S. capacity will necessitate Washington's shifting resources away from Europe to other theaters.

Yet the answer to Europe's security problem is not simply more money and expanded capacity. To lessen dependence on the United States, Europeans will also have to integrate their defense efforts. This task will not be easy. The show of unity in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine has

masked continuing challenges to an integrated approach. Threat perceptions differ across the continent. In particular, countries along the Russia-NATO frontier feel acutely more threatened by Russia than those farther west. Furthermore, armies are still controlled by national governments, and there is little support for creating a European force. That national defense ministries have their own vested interests and favored arms producers militates against the standardization of equipment across the continent and efficient defense production.¹⁰ Despite years of close partnership, national rivalries still erode trust and complicate European decision-making; many countries, such as Poland and the Baltic states, are more willing to entrust their security to the United States than to their European allies.

United States

The United States is in the middle of in a major debate about its global mission, which will figure heavily in the 2024 presidential election and beyond. As a rule, foreign policy rarely plays a central (let alone decisive) role for American voters, who are generally more focused on socioeconomic matters that directly affect their daily lives. However, concerns about immigration and control of the southern U.S. border are directly related to U.S. decisions on support for Ukraine: Why, certain Republican leaders have asked, should the United States spend funds on Ukraine that could be better used to defend the southern border?¹¹ Foreign policy and European security are thus brought into the debate, if only through the back door.

The debate pits those who argue for retrenchment against those who seek to restore the United States' global leadership. The former advocate a selective withdrawal from global commitments to focus on domestic issues. Although some of these proponents are true isolationists, the majority understand that the United States needs to be engaged in an interconnected world; they would limit U.S. engagement to a narrow set of strictly defined vital interests and refrain from efforts to police the world or spread democratic values. By contrast, the latter group, which includes President Joe Biden and his senior officials, aspires to renew and strengthen U.S. global leadership. They advocate an activist, interventionist approach to the world in the defense and propagation of liberal democratic values. For them, the United States is the ultimate guarantor of the liberal, rules-based international order, which they regard as vital to American security and prosperity.¹²

Despite these fundamental differences, both schools of thought agree that Europe has to do more to provide for its own defense. Retrenchers and restorers would, of course, proceed in different ways. Crudely put, most retrenchers would leave Europe to its own devices, with little concern about whether it succeeds or fails. Restorers would be inclined to work closely with European governments to gradually shift the lion's share of defense responsibilities to them while ensuring continued partnership in securing the continent, as well as on a range of global issues. Retrenchers would expect Europe to emerge with strategic autonomy, capable of operating independently of the United States and perhaps at times even in opposition. Restorers, on the other hand, would hope that Europe's enhanced capabilities would be embedded in a framework that still provides for American leadership in Europe and elsewhere across the globe.

INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS

Russia's war against Ukraine is reshaping the institutional foundations of security in Europe. NATO has revived its original mission of deterring and, failing that, defeating Russian aggression. The EU has

been called upon to play a greater role on security matters, while the OSCE is being increasingly marginalized. Americans and Europeans agree that the European pillar of the security order needs to be consolidated and fortified. The question is how these institutions should relate to one another to best advance stability and security in Europe.

NATO and the EU

Although reenergized, NATO will still have to undertake substantial reform to carry out its core mission vis-à-vis Russia in the coming years. The likelihood of a decreasing American presence on the continent makes consolidating a stalwart European pillar inside the alliance the top priority. That pillar will need to be capable of handling—on its own—most contingencies in and around Europe that do not risk a direct military confrontation with Russia (such as instability in the Balkans and North Africa). Logically, the pillar should be based on the EU. With the accession of Finland and Sweden, all EU members except Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta (none known for their military prowess) are NATO members—and all the major European military powers except Turkey and the United Kingdom are part of the EU.

Success in building a European pillar within NATO will require a foundational shift in the U.S. mindset. Since the alliance's founding, Washington has insisted on being at the helm; wary of a European faction that could challenge its primacy, the United States has at times deliberately exploited tensions among its European allies to ensure its dominant position. Going forward, the United States needs to recognize the benefits it would derive from a European partner with strategic autonomy. Washington could not only redeploy assets to the Indo-Pacific but also obtain a great-power partner that could help it manage regional conflicts, create stabilizing regional balances of power, and counter terrorism, piracy, and transnational criminal groups worldwide.

With this new mindset, the United States and the EU, along with the United Kingdom and, if possible, Turkey, should develop a comprehensive roadmap toward a future NATO built on dual American and European pillars. This new framework would be based on a shared present and future threat assessment and would entail agreement on force posture and structure, weapons procurement, and joint investment in Europe's defense-industrial sector, among other things. A critical element would be a plan for the gradual substitution of European for American capabilities, with one exception: the United States would continue to extend its nuclear umbrella to Europe. The British and French nuclear forces could continue to play a supporting role, but their arsenals lack the size and complexity to deal with the full range of nuclear scenarios. Europeans would eventually take over as the supreme allied commander for Europe as the American troop presence was reduced to a token force.

A European pillar based on the EU would go a long way toward easing if not eliminating the continuing tension between NATO and the EU in the field of security. For all practical purposes, the EU would become a member of the alliance, and cooperation between the two entities should be seamless. Non-NATO EU members would thus enjoy an implicit Article 5 security guarantee, which would be extended to new members as the EU expanded to include non-NATO allies in the Balkans and the former Soviet space.

The OSCE

The OSCE is the world's largest security organization, encompassing fifty-seven states from Europe, North America, and Central Asia. It grew out of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which was created as a multilateral forum for East-West dialogue and negotiation in 1973. After two years of meetings, it adopted the Helsinki Final Act. Thereafter, participating states met to broaden their commitments and review their implementation along three dimensions: politico-military affairs, economic and environmental affairs, and human rights and democratic institutions. To manage the historic change at the end of the Cold War, the CSCE was institutionalized with responsibilities for conflict management and resolution and for advancing arms control agreements and confidence-building measures, among other things. It was renamed the OSCE in 1994.

Because NATO and the EU will likely continue to expand to include nearly all European states in the years ahead, there will be little need to retain the OSCE as a pan-European security organization. NATO, the EU, or ad hoc Western groups can take over the work of conflict resolution and monitoring that the OSCE has performed in the Balkans and the South Caucasus, if necessary and appropriate. OSCE institutions that still have a role to play in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, such as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, can be set up as independent organizations funded by participating states.

The issue is not simply one of redundancy, however. The spirit of the OSCE—charged with advancing security and cooperation in an undivided Europe grounded in shared democratic values and no longer marked by a bitter U.S.-Soviet rivalry—is not well suited to a Europe enmeshed in confrontation between a democratic West and an autocratic Russia. Not surprisingly, the OSCE's value has steadily declined in the past decade as Russia has grown more authoritarian in its domestic politics and more aggressive in its conduct abroad, raising tensions with an expanding West. Neither the United States nor Russia has had much political interest in the organization; NATO and the EU have become preferred forums in the West for dealing with security, economic, and other issues that form the OSCE agenda.

In those circumstances, there is little reason to reform the OSCE so that it can continue to work in a sharply divided Europe. There is also little reason to formally abolish it: it could still serve as a forum where the United States and Europe could meet with Russia to discuss (and likely disagree on) a range of issues. That could have value in the absence of other regular communication channels. Nevertheless, in an era of intense conflict, the OSCE is destined to wither away.

THE WAY FORWARD

Advancing the vision of a free, prosperous, and secure Europe within an EU-NATO framework with beneficial trade and investment ties with Russia that is responsibly managing geopolitical competition is a multiyear project that will stretch well into the next decade and beyond. The steps that the West takes today in countering Russia's aggression against Ukraine need to be designed with that future in mind. The urgent measures taken now to stabilize the Ukrainian situation and to bolster deterrence along the Russia-NATO frontier should flow into a broader effort to anchor Ukraine in the West and build a capable European pillar inside NATO based on a larger EU role in the continent's security. The creation of an EU-NATO security framework that embraces most of Europe outside of Russia would then provide the foundation for engaging Russia to restore beneficial commercial and scientific ties

and ease tension along the frontier, even as the West and Russia pursue different and often conflicting geopolitical goals.

The logic of the sequencing should be clear, but the execution will be less straightforward as unforeseen contingencies force adjustments in tactics and pace. A concrete plan of action could look as follows.

Top Priorities

Stabilize Ukraine. The strategy should be defensive. Rather than liberating occupied territory, the primary goal should be thwarting further Russian advances on the battlefield and providing reliable air defense of the 80 percent of the country Kyiv controls, starting with major cities and critical infrastructure. This strategy will require sustained military, financial, and humanitarian support from the West while Kyiv puts in place the politically sensitive measures needed to mobilize additional troops for the frontlines. Credible defense will help create the conditions in which economic reconstruction can begin with public (and eventually private) investment. It should also enable Kyiv to ease if not lift martial law. Doing so would provide space for more normal political activity, including elections, which would strengthen Ukraine's democratic foundations and reinforce the legitimacy of public authorities, starting with the president.

Stabilize the NATO-Russia frontier. NATO needs to continue the effort it began in the months before Russia's full-scale invasion to buttress its deterrence posture along the entire frontier, now extended by some 830 miles with Finland's membership. Given the brutality of Russia's occupation of Ukrainian land, the focus should be on deterrence by denial, particularly for the Baltic states. A strategy centered on liberating those states after they have been overrun by Russian forces, as NATO planned until quite recently, is no longer morally justifiable. The addition of Finland and Sweden to the alliance should make deterrence by denial substantially more credible in the Baltic region. Such deterrence will also be enhanced if NATO members commit to a sustained effort to expand and modernize their defense-industrial sectors and make it clear that they are prepared to engage in—and win—an arms race with Russia. Even with all these measures, deterrence by punishment will remain a critical backup of NATO's posture—and that requires an ironclad U.S. commitment to honor its Article 5 obligations.

Accelerate the construction of NATO's European pillar. With U.S. support, Europe needs to build on the joint efforts it launched to push back against Russia's aggression toward Ukraine. French President Emmanuel Macron recently put forth several viable suggestions: the development of a strategic concept for a European defense initiative, further steps toward creating strategic cohesion between European armies, and joint efforts to forge a more integrated and productive defense-industrial sector.¹³ The key goal should be to maximize Europe's effectiveness at checking Russia's aggression.

Reduce Russia's scope for hybrid warfare. Russia has stepped up its hybrid warfare against the West to erode support for Ukraine and challenge Western dominance on the global stage. To this end, it has not so much sown discord as exacerbated existing divisions through disinformation campaigns while using cyberweapons to put critical infrastructure at risk. To counter Russia, the West needs to harden its societies in two ways: by continuing to develop superior cyber defenses to protect essential infrastructure and by putting its own houses in order to demonstrate that Russia will have little success

in trying to weaken the West from within. Close consultations, exchanges of best practices, and joint efforts between the United States and its allies and partners will be key to foiling Russian tactics.

Equally important will be offensive operations. The West—and particularly the United States—is undoubtedly already pursuing robust cyber operations against Russia, even if the public is not privy to the details. But the West has to do a better job at crafting a narrative around Ukraine and the broader Russia-West conflict that erodes elite and popular support for the war inside Russia. To say that the West is fighting the Putin regime but has no quarrel with the Russian people is far from sufficient, especially when Western sanctions are clearly aimed at weakening the Russian economy, which can only hurt Russians' standard of living. Instead, Russians need reassurances that Western leaders are prepared to deal constructively with Russia's security concerns. The West could make clear that the arms control and other measures offered in the run-up to the invasion, which Putin rejected as inadequate, remain on the table. It should also lay out the conditions under which sanctions—especially on individuals—could be lifted, and it should stop efforts to prevent Russian athletes and artists from performing in the West except in the most egregious cases of support for the Kremlin's aggression. Such steps will not have an immediate effect, but they could slowly erode support for Putin, especially as battlefield casualties mount.

Intermediate Goals

Anchor Ukraine in the West. As long as Ukraine is at war with Russia or renewed war with Russia is likely (as it will almost certainly be for many years into the future, given the place Ukraine occupies in Russia's geopolitical imagination), NATO membership will be off the table. The chances of the now thirty-two allies reaching a consensus on Ukraine's membership, let alone the U.S. Senate mustering the two-thirds majority for U.S. approval, are slim. In the post-Cold War era, NATO has only admitted states that it thought it would not be called upon to defend against Russia in the near future. Indeed, new members joined when the West—and NATO as an institution—was seeking to build partnership with Russia. Finland and Sweden are the two exceptions, but both countries already shared close security and defense ties with individual NATO allies; there was little doubt that they could make a robust contribution to NATO's mission, and no one expected an imminent Russian attack.

As a result, the security guarantees that Ukraine seeks will have to be fashioned outside of NATO for years to come. Part of the answer lies in closer bilateral security, defense, and intelligence cooperation between Ukraine and individual NATO allies, including the United States, as outlined in the Group of Seven July 2023 declaration and along the lines of what many NATO countries are now providing.¹⁴ These arrangements will need to be fully resourced for at least a decade and probably longer. One central element should be joint efforts to modernize and expand Ukraine's defense-industrial sector so that it can meet the bulk of the requirements for its armed forces.

EU membership would also reinforce these security guarantees. Accession talks have just begun. They will prove to be long and arduous, as they have been for other countries, and they are further complicated by the current conflict; the EU has never admitted a state at war, let alone against Russia.¹⁵ In these circumstances, the EU needs to be flexible. It should give Ukrainians a taste of the benefits of membership through interim forms of cooperation while they undertake the tough but necessary political and economic reforms for full membership. Otherwise, the EU risks alienating Ukraine, cultivating backlash, and spurring the emergence of a nationalist state that could, at a minimum, destabilize the situation in and around the Black Sea.

Resolve the Ukraine crisis. Shorter or longer cease-fires are possible, and the war in Ukraine could become a frozen conflict, but the West's goal should be to negotiate an enduring settlement that is as consistent as possible with the pre-conflict norms of European security. Negotiations will not take place in a single channel but multiple interlocking ones, as any resolution will affect broader questions of European security. Progress in the various channels will be made at different speeds; the critical task will be to ensure that they all move in the same direction.

A U.S.-Russia channel is indispensable because only those two countries have the wherewithal to unilaterally alter the security equation in Europe. Russian-Ukrainian talks will be required to deal with issues narrowly focused on the conflict, such as prisoner exchanges and transactions across the line of contact. Europeans will need to be present at most discussions dealing with the continent's security architecture. To ensure coherence across forums and to reduce concerns that the United States could try to negotiate over the heads of its allies and partners, the United States, Ukraine, and Europe will have to commit to close consultations.

One of the more challenging issues will be the territorial settlement, because Russia will almost certainly be occupying some Ukrainian land when negotiations begin. The most likely outcome is that the line of contact will determine the territorial settlement, even if Ukraine and the West do not recognize *de jure* Russia's annexation of seized territory. More conducive to lasting peace, however, would be a settlement based on the democratic principle of self-determination. Long talks would be needed to agree on the technical details of referenda in disputed provinces—who can vote, what constitutes a clear expression of the people's will, how elections will be credibly monitored, and so on—but agreement on the principle to be applied would in itself be a meaningful achievement and could set a precedent for other unresolved territorial disputes in the western Balkans and South Caucasus.

Sanctions relief will be part of any settlement. The West will want to use it for leverage, especially on the territorial settlement. The goal should be the normalization of commercial relations between Russia on the one hand and Ukraine and the West on the other—not only because it would benefit all parties involved but also because it would loosen Russia's economic dependence on China.

The Destination

Firmly establish a European pillar in NATO. Between them, NATO and the EU should encompass all of Europe beyond Russia, with the possible exception of Belarus and the South Caucasus. Coordination between NATO and the EU on security matters should be seamless, and the United States and Europe should have a common understanding of the security tasks for which Europe will bear primary responsibility.

Reduce the expense of maintaining a stable Russia-NATO frontier. The resolution of the war in Ukraine will be embedded in the larger question of European security. Arms control will be one element of any settlement, if only to separate Russian and Ukrainian forces. In subsequent years, the West should engage with Russia to restart and adapt many of the arms control agreements and confidence-building measures that have lapsed in the past ten to fifteen years. Particularly important will be a modified version of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, which would help reduce tension along

the Russia-NATO frontier and lower the costs of deterrence. The West should also seek to develop with Russia a cyberspace code of conduct to reduce the threat of hybrid warfare.

At some point, it would make sense to reestablish a consultative platform between Russia, the EU, and NATO. It could be modeled on the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, which the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act created. This model would entail Russia's meeting with NATO and the EU as a unified entity rather than sitting at the table on a national basis with all NATO and EU member states. The talks would focus on ways to reduce the risk of conflict along the frontier, not on cooperative security partnerships as earlier NATO-Russia forums did.

These arrangements will be similar to those instituted in the post-Cold War era (which clearly failed to deter Russia's aggressive actions over the past decade), but they would prove more effective in the changed geopolitical setting. The new arms control and confidence-building measures would be put in place only as part of or after a settlement of the Ukraine conflict—that is, at the point that Russia has reached the limits of its power. At such a time, Moscow would be focused on protecting what it has rather than on future gains, and it would want assurances that the West is restricted in its ability to project military power into Russia proper.

In addition, the consultative council would likely be established only after NATO and EU had reached the limits of their own expansion in Europe, thereby drawing a solid demarcation line between Russia and the West. The earlier arrangements ultimately foundered because Russia and Europe were contesting where that line would be drawn. In the future, it would be a matter of managing relations along a clearly delineated boundary. Good fences limit geopolitical rivalries.

CONCLUSION

Geopolitical security arrangements are more stable and sustainable if they are based on a durable balance of power and an agreed set of principles of conduct. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act appeared to meet those criteria at the time, but stability prevailed for only a brief period before the collapse of Soviet power and the dramatic weakening of Russia in the 1990s catalyzed a radical geopolitical shift. From the late 1980s until Russia's attack on Georgia in 2008, the Helsinki system provided a framework within which the United States and its European allies could redraw the geopolitical landscape in Europe in their favor and at Russia's expense at a time when Moscow was too weak to mount effective resistance. Since 2008, the system has rapidly frayed as Russia manifested its willingness to use force to advance and defend its interests.

As long as today's intense adversarial relations persist, any talk of a Helsinki 2.0 is premature. The cardinal task is rebuilding a stable balance of power that effectively constrains Russia's expansionist impulses even while the Kremlin believes that it has sufficient power and resources to guarantee its own security. Achieving the necessary balance will take considerable time and effort, and it will likely require new leaders in key countries, starting with Russia. In time, however, it could prove possible to recreate the conditions of the early 1970s—when a mutual desire to reduce the costs of rivalry and foster predictability made it possible to negotiate the Helsinki agreement.

Even if this delicate balance can be achieved, the situation would have to endure for years before there would be sufficient trust between the West and Russia to negotiate a Helsinki 2.0 in good faith. Consequently, for the foreseeable future, Europe's security will have to be grounded in deterrence and defense, European power and unity, and transatlantic cooperation.

About the Author

Thomas Graham is a distinguished fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. His book, *Getting Russia Right*, was published in September 2023. He is a cofounder of Yale University's Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies program and sits on its faculty steering committee. He is also a research fellow at Yale's Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies. He has been a lecturer in global affairs and political science since 2011 and teaches courses on U.S.-Russia relations and Russian foreign policy. Graham was special assistant to the president and senior director for Russia on the National Security Council staff from 2004 to 2007, during which time he managed a White House-Kremlin strategic dialogue. He was director for Russian affairs on the staff from 2002 to 2004.

Graham served as an advisor to Kissinger Associates, a New York City-based international business consulting firm, from 2008 to 2021, prior to which he served as a U.S. Foreign Service officer for fourteen years. His assignments included two tours of duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in the late Soviet period and in the middle of the 1990s, during which he served as head of the political internal unit and acting political counselor. Between tours in Moscow, he worked on Russian and Soviet affairs on the policy planning staff at the U.S. Department of State and as a policy assistant in the office of the undersecretary of defense for policy. Graham serves on the advisory board of Russia Matters, a project of Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs that aims to enhance the understanding of Russia among policymakers and the interested public. Graham holds a BA in Russian studies from Yale University, as well as an MA in history and a PhD in political science from Harvard University.

Endnotes

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