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War in Ukraine, a punch on the international chessboard*War in Ukraine, a punch on the international chessboard**Abstract:*

The military invasion of Ukraine is going to have far-reaching consequences for international relations. But it is not the beginning of a new global ordering model. This war is simply one more chapter in the competition between great powers that has already been taking place in past decades. What is new, yes, is the possibility of escalation in the conflict that could lead to direct military confrontation between Russia and the North Atlantic Alliance. Without proxies, as has been the case until now.

The bitterness in the positions adopted by all the actors involved, as well as the deaths and destruction caused, have closed the doors to any possibility of understanding between Russia, Ukraine, NATO and the European Union. The challenge now is to find a way out of this crisis that allows Russia to claim victory, albeit rhetorically, and Ukraine a viable future as a sovereign nation. Difficult, very difficult.

Keywords:

War, sanctions, military escalation, nuclear weapons.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the *Analysis Papers* are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Guerra en Ucrania, un puñetazo sobre el tablero internacional

Resumen:

La invasión militar de Ucrania va a tener consecuencias de gran calado para las relaciones internacionales. Pero, en contra de lo que se ha llegado a afirmar, no es el comienzo de un nuevo modelo de ordenamiento global. Esta guerra es, sencillamente, un capítulo más de la competición entre grandes potencias que ya se venía produciendo en las pasadas décadas. La novedad, eso sí, es la posibilidad de escalada en el conflicto que pudiera llevar al enfrentamiento militar directo entre Rusia y la Alianza Atlántica. Esta vez, en contra de lo que venía siendo habitual hasta ahora, sin actores interpuestos, sin proxis.



El enconamiento en las posiciones adoptadas por todos los actores implicados, así como las muertes y la destrucción causadas, han cerrado las puertas a cualquier posibilidad de entendimiento razonable entre Rusia, Ucrania, la OTAN y la Unión Europea. El reto de revertir este bloqueo consiste en encontrar una salida a esta crisis que permita a Rusia cantar victoria, aunque sea de manera retórica, y a Ucrania un futuro viable como nación soberana. Difícil, muy difícil.

Palabras clave:

Guerra, sanciones, escalada militar, armas nucleares.

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Force is the right of beasts

Marcus Tullius Cicero

Everything changed on 24 February.

In the months and weeks leading up to that date, the debate in specialist circles in the West was framed from two temporal perspectives. In the short term, in the immediate term, speculation about possible scenarios of Russian military intervention in Ukraine was rampant. Scenarios ranged from maintaining hybrid pressure on Ukraine (intimidatory deployment near the common border, cyberspace actions, diplomatic pressure, threats of gas supply restrictions...), through limited intervention in the south and east of the country, to a possible full-scale invasion, the seizure of Kiev and the overthrow of the Zelensky government as the top option. To be honest, the latter possibility was considered by many to be the least likely. Those of us who thought so were wrong.

On the other hand, there were also many analyses of the geopolitical background that had brought us to this point: the interests at stake, the threats perceived by one side or the other, the demands, the unjustifiable excuses, the mistakes made. Discussions repeatedly returned to the consequences of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO's enlargement to the East, Russia's interventions in Georgia, Ukraine (2014), Syria, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

All this has now been put on the back burner, playing second fiddle to the gravity of events. The invasion of a sovereign country, in the 21st century and in the heart of Europe, raises the urgency of finding an acceptable way out to the top of the agenda.

In this tragedy with many victims, the role of the big loser is unequivocally that of Ukraine. Condemned to continue to watch Europe from the sidelines, to accept that its integration into NATO is for the moment unthinkable, to accept that the mutilation of its territory is unlikely to be reversed and to be forced to submit to the designs of an overbearing and brutal neighbouring power. With millions displaced, its infrastructure destroyed, its economy reduced to subsistence levels and, worst of all, with no credible prospect of an

imminent recovery. Limited sovereignty, Brezhnev-style, decades after the demise of the Soviet Union.

The role of the big three

Russia's increasing pressure on Ukraine prior to the 24 February attack, as well as Moscow's repeated demands to prevent Ukraine's NATO membership and to move NATO's military presence away from Russia's borders, were interpreted by the Allied ranks as an expression of Russia's desire to redesign the European security framework that emerged in Helsinki-1975. In the absence of a detailed definition of this new framework, a far from simple task in theory, the relevance of an *aggiornamento* did not seem far-fetched. This half-century in the history of the old continent has been very intense: one of the signatories of those agreements, the USSR, simply no longer exists, and the strategic balance in Europe has changed substantially. This is why there was no shortage of voices on both sides of the Atlantic calling for the consideration of a special status for Ukraine and for the revitalisation of arms control measures and transparency in military activities, so badly damaged in the last decade with the withdrawal of both Russia and the United States from almost all the agreements signed in the past. But the invasion makes the opening of a negotiating table on this issue unfeasible at present.

Russia's aggression has kicked the European and global geopolitical chessboard, opened Pandora's Box and triggered a crisis that can no longer have a good outcome. Has the Kremlin overestimated its forces and underestimated the resilience of the Ukrainian people and the West's determination to repel the invasion? Even if the military defeat of Ukraine, costing more or less resources on the ground and more or less human lives, including Russian lives, is possible, Moscow will face a worrying reality: thousands of dead Russian soldiers, sanctions, flight of companies and capital, cutbacks in the supply of high-tech components, a domestic economic crisis and increased dependence on China.

The US exit from Afghanistan last summer, as well as the almost immediate unveiling of the agreement between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (AUKUS), were but two clear signs that Washington's turn towards the Pacific, initiated by previous presidents, was also in full force for Biden. The new administration is not completely abandoning Europe, but China remains the object of its greatest concern.

The United States has, since the beginning of the military build-up in the vicinity of Ukraine in the months leading up to the invasion, carried out a complete rejection of Moscow's demands. They wholeheartedly supported by the UK with this stance. Russia's move to cross the threshold between the always fuzzy grey zone and open warfare gives America the opportunity to show a resolve and determination that had been severely wounded after the regrettable withdrawal from Afghanistan, and thereby send a clear message to the two revisionist great powers that Washington will defend its status and hegemony at any cost. Regaining lost credibility means not letting Ukraine fall today, and not letting Taiwan fall tomorrow.

The countries of the European Union, for their part, aware of their role as subsidiary victims in a conflict that, in the end, is to be settled on their own soil, launched an intense campaign of "convincing" Putin not to take the decision that he eventually did. The Brussels authorities, as well as the leaders of France and Germany, among others, repeatedly travelled to Moscow. Europe's diplomatic gamble, however, failed, and Anglo-Saxon assertiveness prevailed.

At this point, it is difficult to imagine a negotiated solution to the conflict that would satisfy both Russian demands and Ukraine's grievances. If any power can attempt to do so with any guarantee of success, it has to be China. With the United States ruled out because of its clear opposition to Moscow, no one better than Beijing can take on this responsibility. And, in a way, it must not be lacking in desire. But it will only do so if it is assured of success in mediation and, with it, a shining role as a reliable and responsible global power. The deep understanding between the two presidents, Xi and Putin, and the confluence of interests vis-à-vis the common American adversary/enemy is well known. From this point of view, it is in Beijing's interest that the United States, which for years now has been engaged in China's Indo-Pacific neighbourhood and with which it has a fierce commercial, technological and geopolitical confrontation, should be forced to diversify its efforts and to undo, to some extent, the path that was leading it away from Europe and towards China's seas. But it is no less true that the great Asian country is, fundamentally, a commercial giant whose market is the whole world. For such a power, nothing is more worrying than a global scenario of widespread instability and war at home for some of its best clients: the European Union and Ukraine itself. The possibility of a sanctions package also being adopted against China is a scenario it will try to avoid at all

costs. It will not be affinity with Russia or animosity towards the West that will determine China's final stance, but purely and simply the defence of its own interests.

The day Europe lost its innocence

The crisis in Ukraine did not begin on 24 February. One need only recall the pressures and threats over the years, the seizure of Crimea and the continued destabilisation of the Donbas. Faced with this reality, the EU reacted with more literature than practical measures. It is true that the Global Strategy¹ approved in 2016 already reflects the concern that Russian assertiveness raised, and that is why the document speaks not only of soft power, but also of hard power, and of Strategic Autonomy. The current president of the European Commission has, from the outset, expressed her intention to have a more geopolitical Commission, and her High Representative often repeats that Europe must be a respected actor, especially in its immediate surroundings. But these good intentions did not materialise into meaningful action. The will to equip itself with a credible military tool is still circling in the Brussels labyrinth, and dependence on Russian gas has not only not been reduced over the past decade, but has actually increased.

To the surprise of all and sundry, on this occasion the European reaction to the invasion has been more forceful than the precedents suggested. Strong sanctions, coordinated with the United States, which, in addition to the Russian economy, will undoubtedly have painful repercussions for Europeans as well. The most significant reaction, in terms of breaking with a position it has maintained since the end of the Second World War, is that of Germany: indefinite suspension of the opening of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, weapons supplies to Ukraine, an increase in defence budgets to 2% of German GDP, immediate spending of 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr and even the questioning, for the moment in only a verbal manner in some circles², of the total closure of nuclear plants decreed by Chancellor Merkel. In Finland and Sweden it is no longer taboo to discuss NATO membership. Denmark is considering joining the Common Security and Defence Policy, which it has so far stayed out of. Switzerland has, at least in this particular case, set aside its sacrosanct neutrality. Hungary questions, but does not prevent, the

¹ Global Strategy for the Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. Available [at eugs_en .pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

² The German Ifo advocates postponing the abandonment of nuclear energy because of the war. Available in [The German Ifo advocates postponing the abandonment of nuclear energy because of the war | Economy | Agencia EFE](#)

Union's firmness. It remains to be seen whether this European cohesion and this being in step with transatlantic allies will stand the test of time and the rebound effects of sanctions on Europe itself. This time, however, everything seems to indicate that Europe has definitively lost its innocence.

(some) No collateral whatsoever damage.

An old military aphorism says that battles are not fought to be lost. Even if we do not know how the military operation that invaded Ukraine was planned, it does not seem too risky to conclude that the ground campaign did not unfold according to Moscow's expectations. At the time of writing, more than a month after the invasion, there has been no rapid conquest of relevant military objectives, nor has the Ukrainian government collapsed. The prestige of an armed forces that was supposed to be modernised and highly effective is now in question. But beyond this speculation, some other collateral damage to Russia is readily identifiable.

In such a scenario, time also works against the invader, as the images of destruction and casualties translate into delegitimisation and discrediting, both within and beyond the borders. The repeated message of fraternity between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples has lost all credibility among the Ukrainian population, including Russian speakers³. By denying Ukraine's existence as a nation, the aggression and destruction wrought by Russian forces have achieved the opposite, creating the concept and feeling of a Ukrainian homeland. In Eastern European countries, too, the feeling of rejection of "Russianness" is growing, in an unfortunate generalisation that does not discriminate between the Russian people and their current government. Whatever the outcome of the conflict, the inevitability of reducing, and eventually severing, Europe's energy and trade dependence on Russia will already be evident to Europe. Trust in, and reliability of, an interlocutor that many already consider toxic will not be restored until the current situation changes substantially. The impact on the population of the extremely harsh sanctions imposed will be profound. Replacing the entire Russian market with Europe with the Chinese market will be impossible and, in any case, will only deepen Moscow's dependence on Beijing.

³These Russian speakers in Ukraine reject Putin's war. NBC News. 3 March 2022]. Available at:[These Russian speakers in Ukraine reject Putin's war \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/These-Russian-speakers-in-Ukraine-reject-Putin-s-war-nbcnews-com)

In the specific field of security, so repeatedly invoked by Russia, the strengthening of transatlantic cohesion and US leadership is evident, even adding some non-allied European countries and its usual friends in Asia, especially Japan. On the eve of the Madrid summit, NATO is regaining its original *raison d'être* at a time when it was most needed, given the doubts and reticence of some allies following the US shift to the Pacific. The West, or liberal democracies, as we want to call them, finds a wonderful opportunity to revitalise itself after the disruptive Trump administration. Europe will arm itself to the teeth to continue to confront Russian aggression: the Baltic republics, the countries of the East, Finland, Sweden, and even Ukraine. A renewed vicious cycle of military escalation in Europe.

For the West, too, there will be unintended consequences, more so for European societies than for the United States or Canada. Energy disconnection will not be easy, quick or cheap. Sanctions will have a rebound effect, and in this respect Western societies are not resilient to prolonged sacrifices. Once again, from a security perspective, it will be the Mediterranean littoral allies that will see our oft-repeated warning call on the situation on the southern flank once again displaced by the urgency and gravity of the crisis on the eastern flank, which is indisputable⁴. Europe's good intentions to strengthen its own military profile, contained in the recently approved Strategic Compass⁵, will be, more than ever or as always, subordinated to the absolute preponderance of NATO as the only reliable organisation, at present, to guarantee security on the old continent. The withdrawal from Afghanistan made this clear, the war in Ukraine highlights it again: Europe is far from being able to intervene militarily in demanding combat scenarios without US support.

And now... how do we get out of this?

Even if it is already too late, even if it doesn't matter, it is worth asking whether a solution would have been possible before 24 February 2022 that would have prevented this nuclear-threatening clash at the heart of the European continent. Russia's demands, so

⁴ For more on this see: DACOBA CERVIÑO, Francisco José. *NATO'S New Strategic Concept: THE SOUTH ALSO EXISTS*. Available in Tribuna Norteamericana. Franklin Institute:

<https://institutofranklin.net/sites/default/files/revistas/%5B2022-01/tn36-dacoba.pdf>

⁵ A Strategic Compass for strengthening EU security and defence in the next decade. European Council, 21/March/2022. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/press/press-releases/2022/03/21/a-strategic-compass-for-a-stronger-eu-security-and-defence-in-the-next-decade/>

difficult to accept at face value (denial of Ukraine's right to aspire to EU and NATO membership, and military withdrawal of Alliance forces to former western confines) could have been accommodated, with concessions on both sides, in a new framework of military coexistence in Eastern Europe. Ukraine, a de facto occupied country since 2014, could not in any case join NATO for this very reason, and the re-drafting of arms limitation agreements and confidence and transparency measures, along the lines of those that could be agreed not so many decades ago, could have provided the necessary guarantees to both Russia and the allies. A European Security framework including Russia, yes, because Europe's Security is not possible without Russia; but not imposed by Russia. The military invasion of Ukraine has wrecked any possibility of a diplomatic settlement as long as military operations on the ground allow both sides to hope that they can be even partially victorious and thus gain an advantageous position at the negotiating table.

In the absence of a possible quick solution that sufficiently and definitively satisfies both sides, the war will drag on over time, with periods of greater or lesser conflict on the ground. A shaky ceasefire; no peace, no war; more war than peace. This is not good news for anyone. Having to rule out a viable and lasting peace leaves us with two bad options, either entrenched and recurrent confrontation or, much worse, an escalation for which the possibility of resorting to nuclear weapons has already been announced. In either case, an unlimited number of scenarios open up, the only variable being the intensity of the crisis.

The ongoing talks in Turkey will have to solve an unsolvable sudoku. The most difficult issue on the table is to define what is meant by the neutrality that Russia demands from Ukraine and that Ukraine would be willing to accept. But what model of neutrality, and in exchange for what? Who will guarantee the security of this nation? There is speculation about a list of countries that would include the permanent members of the UN Security Council, including Russia. This possibility is obviously not to Ukraine's liking.

Yes, certainly the issue of neutrality and security guarantees for Ukraine is the most difficult issue in these negotiations. The other, concerning its territorial integrity (Crimea and Donbas) is simply impossible.

Conclusions

This war in Ukraine will undoubtedly have enormous repercussions on the reconfiguration of the international order that had already been developing since China and Russia, reeling from their respective humiliations, had decided to challenge Western multilateralism and US hegemony. But it is, at the same time, another chapter in the *Great Powers Competition*⁶, which reproduces the tension between the United States and the tandem of China and Russia in other parts of the world: in the Pacific, in the Middle East, in the Maghreb and the Sahel...

The bitterness in each other's positions accelerates the transition of the multilateral international order towards a multipolar world, but with a clear tendency towards a new bipolarity shaped around two blocs, that of the liberal democracies and that led by the revisionist giants, especially China. The other actors, medium and small powers, will be forced, much to their regret, to take sides, to align themselves with one of these poles, as opposed to the other. Multilateral meeting forums are fading away. The UN, with its inane performance in this war, will continue to be paralysed by Russia's veto in the Security Council. The G-7 will no longer be the G-8 that had Russia sitting at the top table. The G20 will not be operational again until the landscape changes radically, if ever, and along the path of *détente*. Nor do trade, climate or arms control agreements have a clear horizon in the current circumstances.

The coordinated and forceful reaction of the Allies to the invasion has been positively surprising. But it will not be easy to maintain it indefinitely. The interests of Americans and Europeans, as well as the repercussions of the war for both, are not the same. Neither is the desired end state: for the United States, the maintenance of its global hegemony; for Europe, finding a *modus vivendi* with Russia, and not only because of the energy issue.

Whatever happens, channels of communication with Russia must first be reopened and then maintained in order to put a definitive end to the war. Then it will be time to address the new security framework for Europe, Helsinki 2.0. A new version, but with the same inalienable principles contained in the 1975 Final Act: respect for the sovereignty of nations and the integrity of borders, among others. New Security Framework for Europe with Russia, not against Russia. With the United States, not outside the United States.

⁶ Bad Idea: "Great Power Competition" Terminology. CSIS. Available at: <https://defense360.csis.org/bad-idea-great-power-competition-terminology/>

Europe is not Europe without Russia. Security in Europe, now and for the foreseeable future, is no security without the United States. In other words, an (almost) impossible sudoku.

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