

“SECURITY VACUUMS” AS A RESULT OF RUSSIA’S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: ASSESSING THEIR IMPACT AND POSSIBLE WAYS OF ADDRESSING

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The security vacuum in Europe has been forming over a period of time since the beginning of the 21st century. Putin’s Russia has become an “active generator” of the vacuum, with Western alliances being the passive ones. Russia’s aggression in 2008 against Georgia and in 2014 against Ukraine and the West’s weak response have reinforced the security vacuum. A direct armed invasion of Ukraine in 2022 became possible due to the ineffectiveness of international organizations such as the UN and OSCE and the lack of counteraction from the G7, NATO, and the EU.

Danger can never be overcome without taking risks. Ukraine withstood the blow of Russian revanchism thanks to the Armed Forces and international assistance. We need a clear commitment of our partners to Ukraine’s victory. Restoration of territorial integrity of Ukraine is important from the standpoint of a practical return to the cornerstone principles of Helsinki 75, which is essential for security and peace in Europe. Ukraine’s membership in NATO should not be a problem, but part of the solution to the security vacuum in Europe and the world.

1. Retrospective.

The security vacuum did not emerge overnight. It was a multilateral, initially dormant process that was gaining traction, and in which geopolitical powers were involved. Clearly, the greatest contribution to the creation of the security vacuum comes from the leading geopolitical players. Some of them do it actively, with their targeted disruptive efforts, while others do it through passive (in)action, not responding or responding inadequately to destructive processes. In Europe, the process of “vacuumization” began with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in Russia in 2000. On April 25, 2005, in his address to the Federal Assembly, Putin called the collapse of the USSR “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” and used this public nostalgia for the USSR to justify geopolitical revanchism for the future.

On February 10, 2007, at the Munich Security Conference, Putin made the first geopolitical challenge to the United States since the Cold War: “For the modern world, the unipolar model is not only unacceptable, but also impossible”¹. At the time, this was regarded as outrageous and populist statements of a global scale coming from an “impeccable democrat” (according to G. Schröder²), into whose eyes the American president (G. W. Bush) looked in 2001 and was convinced that this man “can be trusted”³.

For modern Europe, the “vacuum generators” became visible in 2008. These were the key events:

- The final separation of the Serbian autonomous province of Kosovo through the declaration of its independence with the support of the United States on February 17, 2008;
- the Bucharest NATO summit on April 2–4, where France and Germany blocked the granting of the Membership Action Plan to Ukraine and Georgia;
- Russia’s invasion of Georgia on August 8–12 of the same year with the separation of the Tskhinvali region of Georgia and the declaration of its independence as the “Republic of South Ossetia”.

One should take into account that 2007-2008 were the years of peak oil prices and the first global economic crisis in the twenty-first century, which began in the United States and affected the whole world. Putin’s regime, against the background of the West’s plunge into economic problems, the U.S. overload with operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, was inspired by both the revenues from Russia’s oil exports and its success in blocking NATO’s decisions by a country outside the Alliance, using European leaders—Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy—as his proxies. To quote some of the media reports: “...the Russian president hinted that if NATO grants Georgia a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), Russia will recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, based on the Kosovo precedent, and thus create a buffer zone between NATO forces and its borders. ...if Ukraine is accepted into NATO, this state will simply cease to exist. That is, in fact, he threatened that Russia could begin to annex Crimea and Eastern Ukraine”⁴.

As early as February 20, 2008, George Friedman of Stratfor quite clearly predicted Russia’s behavior after Kosovo’s declaration of independence: *“It also could involve announcing Russia’s plans to annex Russian-friendly separatist regions on its borders — most notably the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and perhaps even eastern Ukraine and the Crimea. Russia thus would argue that Kosovo’s independence opens the door for Russia to shift its borders, too”*⁵.

Probably, the lack of active position of the United States in 2008 in support of granting Ukraine and Georgia MAP and the objections of Germany and France can be explained by the fact that Russia signaled to the United States and NATO about a possible agreement on

¹ <http://kremlin.ru/multimedia/video/page/568>

² <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/adomeitrusse.pdf>

³ <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1202710>

⁴ <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/877224>

⁵ <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/kosovar-independence-and-russian-reaction>

“Afghan transit” that would allow the use of the “northern corridor” through Russia to transport goods to Afghanistan. Russian sources indicate that *“an agreement in principle on the transit of goods for the needs of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force—author’s note) was reached at the Russia-NATO talks at the Alliance summit in Bucharest in April 2008”*⁶. That is, the Kremlin, which felt weaknesses in the U.S. position, proposed a trade-off: “denial of the MAP to Ukraine and Georgia in exchange for agreement on the northern corridor of “Afghan transit”. This corridor was launched in March 2009, and in August 2012, a NATO transport and logistics center was established at the Ulyanovsk-Vostochny airport and Volga-Dnepr Airlines became its main operator⁷.

2. “Passive generator” of the security vacuum in Europe

2.1. The U.S. factor.

Instead of punishing Russia with sanctions for its invasion of Georgia, it was actually rewarded with a reset policy by the Obama Administration. At the Munich Security Conference on February 7, 2009, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden said: *“It is time—to paraphrase President Obama—it’s time to press the reset button and to revisit the many areas where we can and should be working together with Russia”*⁸. And on March 6, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton handed Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov a symbolic red reset button.



On the eve of March 5, 2009, at a meeting of NATO foreign ministers, it was decided to resume official dialogue with Russia within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council, despite the fact that Moscow had not fulfilled the August 12, 2008, ceasefire plan and had not withdrawn its troops from Georgia⁹. The Strasbourg-Kehl NATO summit on April 4 recorded the Alliance’s double-barreled position—demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia on the one hand, and cooperating with Russia on missile defense, security in Central and Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, counterterrorism, etc. on the other.

In September 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama announced a revision of the plans approved by the Bush administration to deploy missile defense elements in Poland and the Czech Republic, which caused great delight in Moscow.

Igor Ivanov, president of the Russian International Affairs Council and head of the Russian Foreign Ministry in 1998–2004, later noted in his publication: *“...under the influence of the “reset” policy, the United States began to take into account Russia’s strategic interests in the former Soviet Union to a greater extent than before. Of course, Washington did not and*

⁶ https://www.perspektivy.info/rus/desk/politika_rossii_v_afganistane_v_20012011_gg_2012-02-17.htm

⁷ <https://ulpressa.ru/2012/08/02/tranzitnyiy-tsentr-nato-v-ulyanovske-skoro-otkrytie/>

⁸ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-vice-president-biden-45th-munich-conference-security-policy>

⁹ https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20090000_cscp_artikel_mhaas.pdf

could not recognize this territory as a special “sphere of influence” for Moscow, but Washington began to listen more closely to Russian concerns. The U.S. administration began to show greater restraint in providing military and technical assistance to Georgia after the August 2008 war and reduced its propaganda rhetoric in support of the Saakashvili regime. The White House, albeit without satisfaction, recognized the defeat of Viktor Yushchenko in the presidential election in Ukraine and the victory of the candidate Viktor Yanukovych, who was considered “pro-Moscow.” The question of further NATO expansion to the East was put on the back burner, largely in order not to create an additional irritant in relations between the United States and Russia”¹⁰.

In 2010-2011, the Obama administration made efforts to push through Congress the agreement on cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy (the so-called “123 Agreement”), which was withdrawn in 2008 after the Russian invasion of Georgia by the Bush administration. This agreement opened the U.S. market to Russian companies in the nuclear industry, which created a serious dependence of the United States on uranium supplies¹¹. At the time, however, the U.S. presented the agreement as a step that would “enhance mutual security, promote economic growth, **cement the gains of the reset**, and provide the relationship with long-term stability”¹². In fact, the consequences of the 123 Agreement are still playing out today, when the United States is blocking sanctions against Rosatom for the invasion of Ukraine and the seizure of nuclear facilities by the Russian Armed Forces and nuclear blackmail.

The fallacy of Western policy towards Russia after the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 was largely due to the inadequacy of the position of the then United States administration led by Barack Obama. Although during Donald Trump’s presidency, the Crimea Declaration was adopted by the State Department, clearly stating that Crimea is Ukraine¹³, Kyiv began to receive lethal weapons from the United States, and American strategic aircraft began to appear in the skies over Ukraine and the Black Sea, the cowboy policy of the 45th U.S. president has generally exacerbated the security vacuum in Europe. The chaotic withdrawal of American and allied troops from Afghanistan, which looked more like a disgraceful retreat, symbolized for the Putin regime the weakness of the United States and the West and became another indicator of the unwillingness of Western countries to consolidate their opposition to Russia.

2.2. The European factor.

The European Union was also moving along the reset track in parallel with the American policy. At the XXV Russia-EU summit in Rostov-on-Don on May 31-June 1, 2010, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso announced a “Partnership for Modernization”¹⁴. In the document, which programmed the EU’s relations with Russia for the period until the signing of a new major agreement, the Russian aggression against Georgia, the need to withdraw Russian troops from the occupied

¹⁰ <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/perezagruzka-v-rossiysko-amerikanskikh-otnosheniyakh-taktich/>

¹¹ <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/us-russian-peaceful-cooperation/>

¹² <https://camegieendowment.org/2010/09/15/123-nuclear-cooperation-agreement-energizing-u.s.-russia-reset-pub-41577>

¹³ <https://osce.usmission.gov/ru/%D0%BA%D1%80%D1%8B%D0%BC%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F/>

¹⁴ https://russiaeu.ru/userfiles/file/2010.06.01_Joint_statement_on_PforM_Russian.pdf

territories, and the large-scale gas crisis of 2009 were omitted. This approach completely satisfied Moscow—the EU tacitly agreed to the “new normal” of Russia’s recognition of the territories of Georgia separated with its participation as “independent” quasi-state formations of the “Republic of South Ossetia” and “Republic of Abkhazia”.

The EU’s reaction to the gas crisis in Europe, artificially created and moderated by the Kremlin for 20 days, was to lay the blame not only on Russia, but also on Ukraine. The European Commission officially left open the question of “what happened on January 7–20, 2009: did Russia stop exporting gas to the EU or did Ukraine interrupt Russian gas transit?” The EC merely stated: “On the night of January 6-7, all supplies from Russia through Ukraine to the EU were cut off. There were no gas supplies from Russia to Europe from January 7 to January 20”¹⁵. Such approaches by the EU created a powerful effect of encouraging further use of gas as a weapon and accelerated the push for the Nord Stream project in the Baltic and South Stream project in the Black Sea, which bypass Ukraine. According to the Kremlin’s plan, this was supposed to increase the EU’s dependence on Russia and contribute to the marginalization of Ukraine, which would become “of no interest to Europe”. It should be noted that Russia has largely succeeded in this plan.

Another factor in the “vacuumization” is the consent of the West to the Corfu process within the OSCE, which Russia actually initiated in 2008 with the proposal of then-President Medvedev to modernize the OSCE through the signing of the European Security Treaty (Helsinki+ agreement). This idea was legalized during a meeting of foreign ministers on the Greek island of Corfu in 2009. Under the pretext of the need to restore confidence in the OSCE area after the “Georgian crisis,” Russia disguised its intentions to divide the OSCE area into the European and Eurasian sectors. According to the Kremlin’s logic, the EU and NATO would be responsible for security in the European sector, while in the Eurasian sector, the CSTO under Russia’s command and Russia as the major CSTO power would play a leading role in ensuring security. The United States would thus be pushed out of continental affairs.

Many years of imitation activities of the group of mediators on the settlement of the Karabakh problem (OSCE Minsk Group: with Russia, the United States, and France as co-chairs; Germany, Italy, Türkiye, Sweden, Finland, and Belarus as members), combined with Moscow’s destructive behavior in the South Caucasus region, have stimulated the growth of a regional security vacuum after Russia’s aggression against Georgia. The failure of the OSCE prompted the Azerbaijani leadership to seek an alternative solution to the problem of restoring its territorial integrity. And this, unlike the OSCE’s fruitless efforts for 28 years, proved to be effective. The alliance with Türkiye, rather than the United States or European countries, ensured the return of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan under its sovereignty during the 44-day Operation Iron Fist in 2020.

Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, as leaders of the two most powerful countries in Europe, have proven to be major contributors to the European security vacuum, due to their

¹⁵ <https://geostrategy.org.ua/storage/app/public/files/nodes/1/book/1/Xa8si15867659506KcE7.pdf>

anti-Americanism and their overzealous behavior towards the Kremlin, as well as their support for the anti-European Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project.

3. “Active generator” of chaos.

After determining on the example of Georgia that the reaction of the West to Russia's actions in the post-Soviet space was weak, lackluster and short-lived, the Kremlin realized that it could continue its expansion in the post-Soviet space, as well as in Europe, using both hybrid and military means. Moreover, the West could be restrained in responding to Russia's actions by reprogramming the political minds of leading countries through the propaganda of false narratives, where Russia is a global good and the United States is a global evil. Vladislav Surkov, one of the creators of Putin's “lasting state,” noted: “Foreign politicians accuse Russia of interfering in elections and referendums around the world. In fact, the matter is even more serious—Russia is interfering with their brains, and they do not know what to do with their changed consciousness”¹⁶.

The altered consciousness of European leaders—Berlusconi, Schröder, Merkel, Sarkozy, Orban, Macron—has led to a neglect of security issues, prioritizing trade and business to the detriment of security, which was covered by the elegant formula *Wandel durch Handel*. This formula proved to be wrong once again in 2014, when Russia occupied Ukrainian Crimea and invaded Donbas, and in 2015, when it intervened in Syria.

The bombing of Syrian cities by Russian aircraft caused a massive outflow of migrants to Türkiye and Europe, which was the use of refugees as a migration weapon. General Philip Breedlove, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe, noted that Russia's massive bombing of civilian targets is aimed at weakening Europe: “Together, Russia and the Assad regime are deliberately weaponizing migration in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve”¹⁷.

Despite the West's condemnation of Russian actions, the imposition of a series of sanctions, and the restriction of high-level contacts, Moscow did not stop. And the phrases “Ukrainian crisis” and “conflict in Ukraine” sounded good to the Kremlin, as the West did not talk about Russian aggression, trade continued despite the sanctions, and the Nord Stream 2 and Turkish Stream projects, LNG plants and terminals in the Arctic, were under way.

At the same time, Russia's top officials were openly talking about the inevitable collapse of the European Union. Even French President E. Macron felt that “Putin's dream is to dismantle the EU”¹⁸. The West's opposition or mere verbal deterrence of Russia through expressions of deep concern only aggravated the security vacuum in Europe and encouraged the Kremlin to take more and more overt actions against either the EU or NATO, especially in regions where the latter is particularly vulnerable. Suffice it to recall Russia's actions in 2019 to block the areas of NATO's exercises with partners—Sea Breeze off the Ukrainian coast and Agile Spirit off the Georgian coast. In 2020, Russia continued its practice of

¹⁶ https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html

¹⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-commander-russia-uses-syrian-refugees-as-weapon-against-west/a-19086285>

¹⁸ <https://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2018/09/03/1729093.html>

blocking large areas of the Black Sea, interfering with freedom of navigation, without encountering any resistance to its actions. It openly demonstrated that the Black Sea is a “Russian lake” and that NATO has no place here.

The EU’s longstanding policy of blocking accession of Türkiye to its ranks has led not only to Ankara’s disillusionment with Europe, but also to the emergence of strong anti-Western sentiments and a tilt toward Russia in Turkish foreign policy. As a result, in the face of Russia’s aggression in the Black Sea region, even though Türkiye did not side with Russia, it did not fully solidarize with the West’s counteraction to it. Türkiye did not allow Russian Navy ships to enter the Black Sea in accordance with the Montreux Convention, but at the same time did not join the sanctions against Russia and allowed civilian ships with military equipment that Russia was sending from Syria to the Ukrainian front to pass through the Bosphorus. In general, Ankara’s actions to prevent additional Russian Navy forces and assets from entering the Black Sea and to facilitate the creation of a grain corridor for the export of Ukrainian grain can be characterized as contributing to military de-escalation, along with the defeats of the Russian Black Sea Fleet that it suffered at the hands of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

4. Asian de-stabilizer in Europe

China’s “peace plan” to resolve the “Ukrainian crisis,” which Beijing unveiled on February 24, is part of Xi Jinping’s policy of consolidating his reputation as a peacemaker and demonstrating to the world that China has an alternative to the Western model of international relations and security. A few days earlier, on February 21, Beijing unveiled the Global Security Initiative, and on February 24, its position on resolving the “Ukrainian crisis”. Then, on March 10, China reconciled its eternal regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia.

“Dialogue and negotiation are the only viable solution to the Ukraine crisis”, reads the “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis”¹⁹, but it does not mention the need to withdraw Russian troops from Ukraine. China does not question the legitimacy of Russia’s attack on Ukraine. Beijing appeals to the UN Charter to resolve the “crisis in Ukraine”²⁰ and, like Russia, it insists that the world order should be multipolar and based on the central role of the UN and its Security Council. The intention of the Sino-Russian tandem is quite understandable against the backdrop of dysfunctional UN institutions due to the abuse of the veto by both countries.

It is no coincidence that China’s Special Representative for Eurasia, who served as ambassador to Russia for 10 years, was appointed as the head of the delegation for “resolving the Ukrainian crisis.” It would have been logical to appoint one of the diplomats of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs who had been involved in Ukraine, for example, one of the former Chinese ambassadors to Ukraine, or someone from the Chinese

¹⁹ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Xi+and+Putin+s+Burgeoning+Bromance&utm_campaign=Xi+and+Putin+s+Burgeoning+Bromance

²⁰ Ibid.

diplomatic corps in Europe, or a long-time special representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for external security. This did not happen. With this nomination, **Beijing demonstrates that it views Ukraine as part of the Eurasian, not European, space**. Thus, the appointment is further evidence of China's biased rather than neutral position on the "Ukrainian crisis".

Beijing shows no signs of abandoning its pro-Russian "neutrality". Xi declared that "China-Russia ties have gone far beyond bilateral relations and are of vital importance to the modern world order and the fate of mankind"²¹.

Besides, it is China's own interest that determines its actions. Czech President Petr Pavel's assessment is comprehensive in this context: "China cannot be trusted to mediate peace between Russia and Ukraine", "China only wants what's best for itself—and, for now, that's more war", "Beijing can get cheap oil, gas and other resources from Moscow—in exchange for its "no limits" partnership with the Kremlin", "It is also good for China that the West is probably becoming a little bit weaker by supporting Ukraine"²².

However, the French president took a separate position on China's "mediation initiative", which caused dissonance in the consolidated position of Western countries. China, unlike the United States and Canada, is not a member of the OSCE, and the principles of Helsinki 1975 are not a guide for it. It is therefore no accident that it was the Chinese ambassador to France who, sometime after E. Macron's visit to Beijing, voiced a thesis, scandalous and void from the point of view of international law, that post-Soviet countries lack sovereignty, hinting that the generally accepted principles of inviolability of borders and territorial integrity cannot be fully applied to them. Although official Beijing denied the statement of its ambassador, the incident nevertheless showed the real, not declarative, principles that guide China's foreign policy and international relations. Their essence is that great powers (members of the UN Security Council) decide the fate of the world and small powers, and small powers are obliged to take into account the interests of the great ones.

5. Overcoming the security vacuum. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1. The need to rethink approaches.

An ancient Latin aphorism states: "Nemo periculum sine periculo vincit", i.e. "nobody can conquer danger without taking risks". The current approach of NATO is to minimize risks for member states by avoiding confrontation with Russia, where the main argument is to avoid a conflict with nuclear power. The flaw in this approach is that it is impossible to escape confrontation, without compromising one's own security, if the adversary sees not only an inability to withstand them, but also an unwillingness to fight back. With this approach, Russia is tempted to "probe Europe with a bayonet", as the Kremlin is gaining more and more illusory confidence in the unwillingness of some NATO members to defend others, especially when the society of Germany, the most powerful European NATO member, is not ready to defend itself—only one in ten Germans is ready to take up arms,

²¹ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/rus/zxxx/202303/t20230322_11046135.html

²² <https://www.politico.eu/article/trust-china-ukraine-czech-republic-petr-pavel-nato-defense/>

according to opinion polls conducted in February 2023²³.

One of the leading American experts on Russia, Victor Rud, put the issue bluntly: “Countries accounting for more than half the world’s economy (Russia’s share is the same as New York City’s), and with the largest military alliance in history, did not prevent Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. Could the G-7 and NATO have done more this time? Yes, of course. Will they? That’s another matter. And if we don’t have the will and the enlightened self-interest to help ensure Ukraine’s recovery of its security and sovereignty today, then why would we have it — for Ukraine or any other country — tomorrow?”²⁴

Today, we are witnessing a resurgence of the erroneous approach of 2008—to deny Ukraine NATO membership and replace it with bizarre (in)security guarantees that somehow look like the Budapest Memorandum 2.0. In fact, the U.S. “efforts” to actively deter Russian aggression over the past 9 years have increased the security vacuum not only in Central and Eastern Europe, where Russia’s aggression against Ukraine continues, but also in Europe and the world as a whole. Not only Moscow, but also Beijing, which is actively preparing for its own “special military operation” against Taiwan, is closely monitoring the behavior of the United States.

The European Union does not display the urgently needed renewal and change of approaches to security issues. In March of this year, the European Commission approved an expanded EU Maritime Security Strategy. The accompanying updated Action Plan was also adopted. Unfortunately, with regard to the Black Sea, the documents do not correspond to the level of threats in it, which have been created by the Russian Federation in recent years and which Ukraine is exposed to.

Russia’s repeated violations of the international law of the sea—the attacks on and seizure of Ukrainian Navy ships near the Kerch Strait in November 2018, obstruction of the international Sea Breeze exercises in 2019–2021, blockade of Ukrainian ports, and destruction of the American MQ-9 Reaper UAV over the Black Sea in international airspace—are examples of Russia’s arbitrariness that require systematic measures and counteraction from Western structures such as NATO, the EU, and leading member states. Yet, the recently released and updated “EU Action Plan...” is inertial, and seems to deliberately focus on less sensitive issues such as “analyzing the impact of the war in Ukraine on cetaceans” or “a coordinated response to marine pollution of various origins...”²⁵.

The head of European diplomacy, Josep Borrell, expressed the EU’s intention: “At a time of growing geopolitical tensions, the EU must learn to speak the language of power also at sea. We are delivering on our commitment to strengthening the EU’s role as a global maritime security provider”²⁶. However, this discords with the adopted documents, which pay little

²³ <https://www.merkur.de/politik/jeder-zehnte-deutsche-im-angriffsfall-zu-kriegsdienst-bereit-zr-92079365.html>

²⁴ <https://cepa.org/article/a-deal-with-russia-it-can-only-bring-disaster/>

²⁵ https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/join-2023-8_en.pdf

²⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_1483

attention to threats in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. The boldest is the expressed intention to strengthen cooperation with NATO, building on the results achieved and in accordance with the three joint declarations on EU-NATO cooperation of 2016, 2018, and 2023²⁷. Obviously, the revision of approaches was prompted by the unprecedented bombings of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea (a sea dominated by the EU and NATO) and the concerns that arose in the context of the security vacuum of maritime infrastructure in the seas around Europe. Although a step forward, such documents do not significantly contribute to improving the security environment, as they largely fail to take into account that security in 2023 cannot be based on the ideas of 2014 (when the first version of the Strategy was adopted). After all, the security space has changed radically and there are threats not only of a hybrid nature, but also of a military kind.

Judging by the Vatican's unexpected activity, the biggest security challenge could be a pseudo-peacekeeping scenario of "resolving the Ukrainian crisis" initiated behind the scenes by Putin's emissaries and certain Western circles inclined to collaborate with the Kremlin, as well as by Russian agents of influence in Ukraine's top state leadership. Its essence will be to freeze the conflict, which will not only preserve the threat of continued aggression against Ukraine, but also increase military and political risks for the Baltic states. The security vacuum will only get worse.

5.2. Possible actions for security de-vacuumization

In June 2015, an article by former Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine Volodymyr Horbulin analyzed possible scenarios for the development of Russia's hybrid aggression and options for Ukraine's actions. The scenario of total war "will mean a complete militarization of society of Ukraine; ... focus on the uncompromising destruction of the enemy; strikes on the enemy's critical infrastructure; active guerrilla and sabotage activities; refusal or minimization of diplomatic and foreign economic cooperation with the enemy state and its satellites; complete subordination of diplomacy to the Armed Forces and military propaganda"²⁸.

Ukrainian diplomacy acts to the best of its ability in the interests of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. But its capabilities are limited. Given the sluggishness, inertia of thinking, the slow processing of reality, and the presence of the aggressor's Trojan horse in Europe (Hungary), the major alliances of states—NATO and the EU—are not only incapable of preventive action, but also fail to respond adequately and in a timely manner. Unfortunately, the U.S. position is not characterized by effective leadership, as it was during the Cold War. Therefore, the formation of a smaller alliance, a conditional "Alliance of the Resolute"—Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states—seems to be an urgent task for Ukrainian diplomacy, especially since such an alliance de facto takes place on the basis of the Ukrainian-Polish tandem, as all these countries border Russia and/or its satellite Belarus and realize that they are already the frontline of a war—so far, a hybrid one. In the context of strengthening counteraction to Russian expansionism and aggression in Europe, Polish expert on Russian

²⁷ https://oceans-and-fisheries.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/join-2023-8_en.pdf

²⁸ <https://zn.ua/ukr/intenal/p-yat-scenariyv-dlya-ukrayino-rosiyskih-vidnosin-.html>

issues Marek Budzisz logically notes: “It is not the United States that will determine the direction in which we will move, but the most interested states, which means that these states, and especially Poland, should be able to act in favor of shifting the center of gravity of the entire NATO by realizing this vision and concluding a military alliance with Ukraine”²⁹.

Ukrainian diplomacy should urge the U.S. administration to adopt a Black Sea Declaration in support of the territorial integrity of the countries of the region in accordance with the 1975 CSCE principles, stating that the United States considers the Crimean Peninsula to be an integral part of the sovereign territory of Ukraine, Abkhazia to be an integral part of the sovereign territory of Georgia, and Transnistria to be an integral part of the sovereign territory of the Republic of Moldova.

It is vital to continue to convince the United States and NATO that Ukraine’s membership in the Alliance is not a problem, but part of the solution to the security challenge for Europe in the face of Russian aggression. In this regard, the position set forth in the “Sustainable Peace Manifesto” by representatives of Ukrainian civil society is key: “Ukraine will always be the first barrier to aggression from the east. That is why Ukraine should be in NATO. We do not consider our future membership only in the context of guaranteeing security for Ukraine. On the basis of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, we want to be, together with our NATO neighbors, the Alliance’s eastern shield against Russian aggression... NATO membership is our contribution to the common European security. Ukraine should become a cornerstone of NATO’s collective defense strategy”³⁰.

In view of the above, it is important to convince the United States and NATO to change the formula of support from “as much as necessary to strengthen Ukraine’s negotiating position” to “everything for Ukraine’s victory”. Efforts should be made to ensure that the idea, which was born during the U.S.-Ukraine discussion between a group of representatives of Ukrainian NGOs and the U.S. Helsinki Commission on the legislative fixation of the goal of Ukraine’s victory in repelling Russian aggression as a priority of U.S. policy, that was transformed into the April 25³¹ bipartisan Wilson-Cohen draft resolution “on Ukraine’s victory”, becomes a guideline for the Biden administration. Similar draft resolutions should be initiated by joint efforts of Ukrainian official and non-governmental diplomacy in the European Parliament, the parliaments of the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.

The success of Ukraine’s diplomacy on the western direction depends on weakening the enemy as much as possible, both at the front and through hitting it in the strategic depths. In turn, the more successful Ukrainian diplomacy is in accelerating the acquisition of the necessary weapons and equipment and strengthening sanctions regimes against Russia, the sooner the Armed Forces will be able to liberate the occupied territories from the enemy, and the sanctions will critically reduce Russia’s financial flows to wage war. Andrew

²⁹ <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/amp/ukrayina-peremoha-polshcha-yes-ssha-bezpeka/32346963.html>

³⁰ <https://www.oporaua.org/report/viyana/24555-manifest-stalogo-minu-svit-pislia-nashoyi-peremogi>

³¹ <https://ukrainian.voanews.com/a/resolutsia-peremoga-ukrainy-kongres-palata-predstavnykiv-joe-wilson-steve-cohen-demokraty-respublikantsi/7065528.html>

Michta, Dean of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, reasonably notes: "...the sooner the Ukrainians get the weapons they need, the less the country will suffer, the less it will cost to rebuild Ukraine... The longer we delay, the higher the cost of this war will be"³².

Taking into account the inertia of thinking at the governmental level of Western countries, their unwillingness to go beyond the false approaches such as "preventing escalation" and "NATO will not fight in Ukraine", indecision and partly cowardice of political leaders of a number of leading countries, at the same time given the availability and willingness of private U.S. military companies to provide high-tech services, Ukraine should urgently consider the possibility of engaging them to level the military imbalance in the war with Russia, especially in the air component and electronic warfare.

This approach will leave Western governments, especially the United States, in their comfort zone of non-participation in the "war in Ukraine", as regular troops will not be involved. At the same time, it would open up the door to the engagement of American and other Western PMCs. Such an approach would be an adequate response to Russia's use of 25 out of 37 registered Russian PMCs in Ukraine³³.

Efforts should be made before the Vilnius NATO summit to finally turn off the "German brake" on Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, which, although weakened, has been activated by inertia since the Merkel era. It is important to coordinate the diplomatic efforts of both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and a group of Central European partner countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the Baltic states) to maintain Germany's Zeitenwende policy, proclaimed on February 27, 2022, by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and to prevent its transformation according to the French model, which could lead to the recreation of the pseudo-peacekeeping format N4, but with Chinese participation, and, as a result, to freezing the conflict and maintaining a security vacuum in Europe.

The joint position of the Prime Ministers of three Central European countries—Petr Fiala, Eduard Heger and Mateusz Morawiecki—published in the Foreign Affairs magazine on April 24 can be considered a guideline for the West to reduce the security vacuum in Europe and the world: "...peace can come only on Ukraine's terms. A frozen conflict would not bring stability or improve security... Gray zones create opportunities for authoritarian regimes to sow instability and heighten tensions. ... resolve in support of Ukraine will also help deter aggression in other parts of the world... That message [*to authoritarian regimes—author's note*] will be especially clear when Ukraine wins and Russia is defeated"³⁴.

Ukraine should be very cautious about China's activity to "resolve the Ukrainian crisis" as it is a hybrid form of assistance to Russia, disguised by Beijing's peacekeeping demagoguery and driven by the intention to isolate Ukraine from the West through the lure of economic assistance for the reconstruction of the country and to turn Kyiv towards cooperation in Eurasian formats under the auspices of China. Given the immutability of Ukraine's official

³² <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/amp/ukrayina-peremoha-polshcha-yes-ssha-bezpeka/32346963.html>

³³ https://www.molfar.global/blog/catalog-of-russian-pmcs?utm_source=socials&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=Molfar

³⁴ https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/free-world-must-stay-course-ukraine?utm_medium=social

position on the “one China” policy, it is important to demand a clear official declaration from China on the territorial integrity of Ukraine within the 1991 borders, the fixation of the status “Crimea is Ukraine” and the demand for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the occupied territories. Only if there is such a declaration can a Chinese delegation headed by a special representative visit Kyiv.

Taking into account the importance of maritime security and critical infrastructure protection for Ukraine, it is important to make diplomatic efforts to involve Ukraine in the format of EU-NATO cooperation within the EU-NATO Task Force on Resilience of Critical Infrastructure, established on March 16 in accordance with the joint statement of the EU and NATO leaders Ursula von der Leyen and Jens Stoltenberg on January 9 this year³⁵.

Finally, the focus of the United States as the leader of the West and NATO on Ukraine’s victory plus the Ramstein format should counterbalance the ineffectiveness of the UN and OSCE and restore the “spirit of Helsinki” in Europe after Ukraine’s territorial integrity is restored.

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The information and views set out in this study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

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³⁵ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_212874.htm?selectedLocale=en