



Photo: © Geert Vanden Wijnngaert, AP, picture alliance.

[NATO. The Indispensable Alliance](#)

# Gradually, Then Suddenly

Assessing Washington's Commitments to Europe in a Pre-war World

Peter Rough

The international security setting has changed dramatically in recent decades. So has American politics. From isolationists to progressives, foreign policy ideologues are offering old wine in new bottles to an American people on the search for answers. It is an open question if these ideas will triumph. Specifically, the sharpest test for US policy toward Europe will be in defining Ukraine's relationship with NATO.

---

Twenty-five years ago, US President Bill Clinton invited NATO leaders to Washington to celebrate half a century of the alliance. The current occupant of the Oval Office, Joe Biden, has issued his own invitations for this summer's celebration of the organization's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. That both events will involve some sort of commemoration is where the similarities between the two gatherings end.

What accounts for this gulf? How can two celebrations of the same alliance only a quarter of a century apart seem even to the casual observer of global affairs to be occurring in different worlds altogether? There is no doubt that the international security setting has fundamentally changed in those brief 25 years. As Grant Shapps, the Defense Minister of the United Kingdom, put it in January, "We've come full circle, moving from a post-war to a pre-war world."<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of American victory in the Cold War, the United States was captivated by the Pollyannish conviction that free markets and globalization would tame Moscow's rivalry with Washington – or even, if the cards fell right, polinate liberal democracy in Russia. This idea was as fashionable and widely held as it was dismissive of history.

But the illusion of maintaining a post-Cold War idyll was easy to cling to as long as reality did not intrude too sharply. The relative placidity in world-historical terms of the decade immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union allowed those of us who wished to remain in denial to do so relatively plausibly. The

events of September 11, 2001, were so violent, so ghastly that many analysts could reasonably argue they had occurred outside of history altogether.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has dealt a coup de grace to these quixotic views. It has pulled back the curtain for all but the most committed denialists, revealing that the deterioration of the international order, which will chill the mood at this summer's NATO festivities, has occurred as Hemingway once characterized bankruptcy – something that occurs "gradually, and then suddenly." Wartime, not peacetime, is the new default setting.

This gradual-then-sudden collapse of illusions has left American policymakers playing catch-up. The number of Sovietologists and Kremlinologists in the United States has steadily declined over the last 30 years as Arab-speaking counter-insurgency specialists replaced Cold War-era graybeards who made their bones studying Russia. If the nature of Russia is "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,"<sup>2</sup> as Churchill described it at the outset of World War II, that enigma appears even more incomprehensible to those studying it today behind a veil of relative ignorance. This is a real problem, as Russia's challenge to the international order constructed by the United States in the aftermath of the Second World War has been laid bare.

And that challenge is here to stay. It is plain to see that Russia's hardline policies do not merely reflect the idiosyncratic worldview of its president, Vladimir Putin. Instead, they are

deep-seated drivers of Russian political life, having been refined over the years by men such as Nikolai Patrushev and Alexander Bortnikov – leading figures among the Siloviki elite who control the security services and run contemporary Russia. If Putin were to leave the scene today, the policies emanating from the Kremlin would look no rosier tomorrow.

Russia has only raised the ante since its invasion of Ukraine. Its leaders station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus and deploy the Wagner Group alongside the Suwałki Gap.<sup>3</sup> Putin himself has issued one rhetorical broadside after another,

most recently raising alarm bells by accusing the Baltic states of “throwing Russian people across the border,”<sup>4</sup> a charge that echoes his previous pretexts for war.

### Competing Approaches to Europe

In previous eras, US leaders have risen to the occasion and rebuffed serious challenges to global stability. Yet after two decades of underwhelming military campaigns in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan, and unsatisfactory operations in Niger, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere, the American public is less confident in



Twenty-five years and a world apart: Since Bill Clinton invited NATO leaders to the alliance’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1999, the international security setting has deteriorated – first gradually, then suddenly. Photo: © Timothy A. Clary, dpa, picture alliance.

the United States' ability to achieve decisive outcomes abroad. These shortcomings have bred strong skepticism of America's foreign policy professionals and of their ability to manage the international order.

It has also provided an opening for alternative visions long in disrepute. In recent years, we have witnessed a proliferation of different approaches to Europe and the world, many of which are currently jockeying for influence in Washington. This blossoming of ideas can be seen as both a reflection and a catalyst of the deterioration in world order.

### **Traditional hawks and classical liberals see the challenges posed by Russia and China as interlinked.**

---

It has also allowed those holding more overtly ideological approaches to foreign policymaking to move closer to the corridors of power. Today, neo-isolationists and traditional hawks are competing for the heart and soul of the Republican Party, just as left-wing progressives are challenging centrists for the reins of the Democrats. As the late Charles Krauthammer put it, neither the isolationist belief that America is too good for the world nor the progressive sense that the world is too good for America lends itself to a robust American foreign policy that defends the national interest.<sup>5</sup> Yet both perspectives enjoy more influence today than they have at any time in recent memory.

To complicate matters further, US leaders today are grappling with changes to the international order that go beyond Russian revanchism. President Xi Jinping's decision to drop Deng Xiaoping's guiding strategy of "hide your strength and bide your time" before China could supplant the United States may go down as the greatest geopolitical misstep of our time.<sup>6</sup> By erasing Hong Kong's freedoms, covering up the coronavirus pandemic it unleashed upon the world,

lashing out in the South China Sea, targeting US allies through tariffs and sanctions and militarily threatening Taiwan, the Chinese leadership has awoken the American people to the dangers posed by the Chinese Communist Party.

### **Russia and/or China?**

This awakening has led to important repercussions on how Americans look at Europe. While US isolationists oppose large-scale engagement abroad on principle, a new generation of so-called prioritizers has emerged, invoking the specter of China to argue that the US should pivot from Europe to Asia. These prioritizers argue that the US should continue to provide NATO with an extended deterrent. However, they believe American officials should ask Europe to carry the lion's share of the burden in supporting Ukraine and deterring Russia.

Both isolationists and prioritizers are engaged in a pitched battle with traditional hawks and classical liberals, who see the challenges posed by Russia and China as interlinked and part of the same whole. Whatever hopes the US once had of separating China from Russia, these conservatives and liberals argue, has now given way to a tacit recognition of Sino-Russian alignment. The only answer to this threat, they say, is a comprehensive plan to counter both challengers.

For its part, the Biden administration has too often succumbed to the progressive tendency to compartmentalize issues and crises in order to pursue avenues of cooperation with, among others, Russia and China.<sup>7</sup> But the Biden team has also acknowledged that evidence of a new, hostile bloc is mounting, even if they have not yet taken enough measures to counter them. Xi's remarks to Putin in Moscow last year that they were "witnessing changes the likes of which we haven't seen in 100 years, and we are the ones driving these changes together",<sup>8</sup> were widely discussed in the United States, and broadly interpreted as yet another expression of alliance between the erstwhile rivals. North Korean and Iranian military support for Russia has merely





Two parts of the same problem: In the US, traditional hawks and classical liberals see the challenges posed by Russia and China as interlinked, for which a comprehensive plan is required in order to counter both. [Photo: © Graeme Sloan, Sipa USA, picture alliance.](#)

reinforced the idea of an anti-American revisionist bloc that cannot be separated into its constituent parts.

### **Burden-sharing Will Continue to Be an Issue**

NATO is changing too, of course. The accession of Finland and Sweden to the alliance flips the script on Russia, and counters many of its pre-war presumptions. Although the Baltic states remain vulnerable to attack, especially as Russia colonizes Belarus, NATO's ability to defend those countries and hold the exclave of Kaliningrad at risk will improve dramatically with the accession of Finland and Sweden to the alliance. When the US Senate voted on Sweden and Finland's membership, the vote was 95-1 in favor

of ratification. This puts into perspective the caricature of Washington as inevitably turning inward.

### **There will be sustained US pressure on European allies to fulfill their Wales Pledges and more.**

---

There is also bipartisan alignment on the importance of burden-sharing within NATO. There have been two NATO Summits since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In Madrid, the alliance adopted a new Strategic Concept; at



Vilnius, it ratified a new generation of regional military plans. Going forward, Washington will be focused on implementing those political and military decisions and on maintaining the momentum they have generated.

Propitiously for those efforts, it is increasingly evident that Europe has come some ways in recent years, a fact which even Republicans skeptical of Europe have begun to appreciate. Europe spent nearly six per cent more on defense in 2022 than it spent in the year before, with frontline allies leading the way.<sup>9</sup> Nearly every NATO nation is increasing its defense budget, and as of this writing, Europe has contributed more than double the amount of overall US assistance to Ukraine.

Still, Europeans continue to suffer from major gaps in air enablers, naval forces, munitions and other key capabilities. In the meantime, Putin has shifted Russia's economy to a wartime footing and pushed defense spending to six per cent of GDP. No matter who occupies the White House next year, the US will be focused on turning pledges into commitments and commitments into capabilities. This will take the form of high-level, sustained US pressure on European allies to fulfill their Wales Pledge and more.

### **Biden views Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty as a tripwire obligating war.**

---

Similarly, whomever American voters send to the Oval Office next November will be racing to absorb the battlefield lessons of Ukraine. The war is transforming the world's understanding of the modern battlefield. Thanks to Ukrainian ingenuity and a multiplicity of emergent and disruptive technologies, such as FPV drones,<sup>10</sup> our conception of what is and is not possible in modern warfare is undergoing re-examination. Amidst these currents of change, perhaps the biggest question facing the next US president is not what lessons to learn from the war, but how to approach Ukraine altogether.

### **Ukraine: Embrace or Keep at Arm's Length?**

At one extreme, President Biden has kept Ukraine outside of the defensive perimeter of NATO, lest its obligations lead the alliance into an open war with Russia that his administration does not want. Time and again, he has made it clear that he views Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which obligates the alliance to take "such action as it deems necessary" in response to aggression,<sup>11</sup> as a tripwire obligating war. Anything less, Biden worries, may tempt Russia to move against NATO.

This has led Putin to conclude that while attacks on a NATO state will trigger a response, military action against nations outside the alliance may be fair game. It is thus easy to understand why Putin has stationed troops in or used force against Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, with disastrous consequences for the West, while so far hesitating to move onto the Baltic states.

Some critics of the Biden administration argue that its approach to Ukraine falters in regarding war as an old-fashioned light switch that can only be flipped on and off, rather than as a dimmer switch with intensity levels that can be adjusted. Analysts like former US Ambassador to NATO Kurt Volker argue that the competition between the US and Russia is better understood as a continuum of offensive and defensive actions: a NATO air defense mission over Ukraine's major cities or a demining campaign in the Black Sea, he argues, is a far cry from sending combat troops into the Russian Federation.<sup>12</sup> Instead of delaying Ukraine's accession, some of these critics would even bring Ukraine into NATO now and erase all doubts about the West's commitment to Ukraine's survival. Of course, the potential downside of immediately admitting Ukraine is that it could force the president to choose between diluting Article 5 or risking escalating conflict with Russia.

Keeping Ukraine at arm's length or fully embracing it as one of the West's own: it is between these two poles where the real struggle in Washington's debate over the future of Europe lies.

A re-elected Biden administration may opt for a version of the former – a so-called Israel option. Washington would provide Kyiv with security assistance but only loose security assurances that kick NATO membership down the road. There are glaring pitfalls to such an approach, as the analyst Peter Feaver has pointed out: Not only does Israel possess nuclear weapons, but the US provides Jerusalem with a qualitative military edge over its regional counterparts. It is not in the American interest for Kyiv to pursue nuclear weapons, and it would be enormously expensive to equip Ukraine with sufficient capabilities to bring it to military parity with Russia. It would also likely require the West to provide Ukraine with weapons that could strike deep into the Russian Federation, turning the dimmer switch up to a level higher than it has ever been.<sup>13</sup>

And those loose security assurances? After the Potemkin commitments of the Budapest Memorandum, Kyiv can be forgiven for expressing skepticism about such promises. Ukraine would certainly welcome a bilateral, ironclad US security guarantee. But such a guarantee would render for naught America's efforts to share Europe's security responsibilities with its European allies. The second option of fully and immediately embracing Ukraine within NATO's blanket of security guarantees – call it the Baltic option – carries its own potential for Pyrrhic outcomes if it is accompanied by a minimalist reading of Article 5. Instead of preventing conflict, such a posture could entice Putin to try his luck.

That leaves NATO membership *after the war has ended* as the possible outcome discussed most often by US analysts. As Ukraine has demonstrated over the past two years to its enthusiasts and skeptics alike, it is a net security provider, and will emerge from the war as the most battle-tested military Europe has seen in over three-quarters of a century. It would prove an enormous asset to NATO. If the alliance decides to issue an invitation for Kyiv to join the alliance, security conditions permitting, it would send a strong signal to Putin that the West is committed

to a viable Ukraine – and is prepared to support it indefinitely and at higher levels of commitment regardless of Putin's intentions.<sup>14</sup>

Even if Putin attempts to forestall such a scenario by prolonging the fight until Russia's prisons have run out of conscripts, it is unlikely that he could sustain today's operational tempo in perpetuity. If the West gives Ukraine the weapons and the support it needs, Ukraine may very well win this war, paving its most viable path to NATO membership in the process. But even if Ukraine does not regain all its territories and decides to pursue peace talks with Russia, NATO's security umbrella could still be applied to the areas under the control of the Ukrainian Armed Forces when major operations cease, with the alliance extracting a pledge from Kyiv to abstain from the use of force against the occupied territories as a condition of membership. This would apply a concept first proposed for Georgia to Ukraine.<sup>15</sup>

How this will play out if a Republican wins the White House is anyone's guess. Former President Donald Trump, the current frontrunner for the Republican nomination for president, has swung like a pendulum between hawkish internationalism and modern isolationism. At one time or another, he has embodied each of the intellectual traditions jousting for supremacy in the party today. Where he would come down on Ukraine's membership in NATO if elected is difficult to predict, although his most recent comments suggest a basic skepticism of the war and Ukraine's prospects.

Regardless of who is at its helm, it will be up to the next US administration to manage the voices in their domestic coalitions, and to prove to Putin that he cannot win in Ukraine. If it does not, there may not be any invitations to NATO's centennial celebration.

---

**Peter Rough** (Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, MALD) is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center on Europe and Eurasia at Hudson Institute.

- 1 Shapps, Grant 2024: Defending Britain from a more dangerous world, speech, 15 Jan 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/njlp> [1 Feb 2024].
- 2 BBC: Winston Churchill's first wartime broadcast, 1 October 1939, in: <https://bbc.in/49yky9U> [1 Feb 2024].
- 3 Detsch, Jack / Gramer, Robbie 2024: Russia's Nuclear Weapons Are Now in Belarus, Foreign Policy, 14 Mar 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/wi7w> [18 Mar 2024]; Kasapoğlu, Can 2023: Ukraine Military Situation Report, Hudson Institute, 2 Aug 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/q2sd> [1 Feb 2024].
- 4 RIA Novosti 2024: В Прибалтике русских людей выбрасывают за кордон, заявил Путин (In the Baltics, Russian people are thrown across the border, Putin said), 16 Jan 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/14cg> [1 Feb 2024].
- 5 Krauthammer, Charles 2016: After a mere 25 years, the triumph of the West is over, The Washington Post, 1 Dec 2016, in: <https://wapo.st/3uFQWsm> [1 Feb 2024].
- 6 Harshaw, Tobin 2018: Emperor Xi's China Is Done Biding Its Time, Bloomberg, 3 Mar 2018, in: <https://bloom.bg/3OF8GLf> [1 Feb 2024].
- 7 Gordon, Michael R. 2024: Russia Rejects U.S. Proposal to Reopen Arms-Control Dialogue, The Wall Street Journal, 18 Jan 2024, in: <https://on.wsj.com/3SzCDgZ> [1 Feb 2024]; The White House 2023: Remarks by President Biden and President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China Before Bilateral Meeting, 15 Nov 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/a6kn> [1 Feb 2024].
- 8 The Telegraph 2023: Xi Jinping and 'dear friend' Putin agree that 'change is coming' in final exchange in Moscow, via YouTube, 22 Mar 2023, in: <https://youtu.be/yMSv-jALIAM> [1 Feb 2024].
- 9 Forum for American Leadership 2024: Europe Is Stepping Up On Defense And Ukraine, But Obstacles Remain, 30 Jan 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/g153> [5 Feb 2024].
- 10 D., David 2024: post, 24 Jan 2024, via X, in: <https://ogy.de/fzrs> [1 Feb 2024].
- 11 NATO 2023: The North Atlantic Treaty, 4 Apr 1949, in: <https://ogy.de/ywg4> [1 Feb 2024].
- 12 Volker, Kurt 2023: Bringing Ukraine Into NATO Without World War III, Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), 29 Nov 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/rihu> [1 Feb 2024].
- 13 Feaver, Peter D. 2023: 2 Options to Prevent the Next Russian Invasion of Ukraine, Foreign Policy, 8 Jul 2023, in: <https://ogy.de/evhr> [1 Feb 2024].
- 14 Volker 2023, n.12.
- 15 Coffey, Luke 2018: NATO Membership for Georgia: In U.S. and European Interest, The Heritage Foundation, 29 Jan 2018, in: <https://ogy.de/y17n> [1 Feb 2024].