

Europe's Post-Cold War Order Is No More

by Riccardo Alcaro

Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to recognise the independence of the self-styled separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas¹ may very well be the beginning of the end of Ukraine as an independent nation.

For Ukraine, a nation of almost 44 million people, catastrophe looms large on the horizon.

For Europe, these events are the harbinger of the end of an era. Europe's post-Cold War order is no more.

The diplomatic solution was at hand

The greatest tragedy is that, on paper, a diplomatic solution existed that would have not just opened an honourable way out of the crisis for all parties involved – Ukraine and Russia, Europe

¹ "Russian President Putin Statement on Ukraine" (video), in C-SPAN, 21 February 2022, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?518097-2>.

and the United States – but would have provided them with tangible security, economic and strategic benefits.

The Biden administration, which so far stood out for its rather competent management of the crisis,² made a substantial offer to Russia.³ The United States was ready to guarantee a moratorium on Ukraine's NATO membership, ostensibly Moscow's greatest concern in spite of the fact that the issue was never really on the agenda. Biden added to this a commitment not to deploy offensive ground-based missiles and troops to Ukraine in a permanent capacity.

² Riccardo Alcaro, "The Return of US Leadership in Europe: Biden and the Russia Crisis", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|04 (February 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/14592>.

³ Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, "With or Without War, Ukraine Gives Biden a New Lease on Leadership", in *The Washington Post*, 20 February 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/20/ukraine-biden-putin>.

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The US president was also ready to open a negotiation on European security that would have addressed a number of issues of interest to the Russians. The United States put on the table greater transparency on military exercises and limits to the deployment of conventional forces and strategic bombers, and was open to allow Russian inspectors to verify that US antiballistic assets in Poland and Romania posed no threat to Russia's nuclear deterrent.

All this would have made it easier for Russia to consider concessions on Ukraine, thus opening room for a renegotiation of the unimplementable Minsk 2 agreement, which was supposed to pave the way to restore control over the Donbas to the government in Kyiv.

Biden and its European allies made it clear to Putin that escalation in Ukraine would be met with a mix of sanctions and greater NATO deployments to central-eastern Europe, precisely the opposite outcome that the Kremlin was ostensibly aiming to avert by way of its massive military mobilisation around Ukraine.

In short, Biden gave Putin the chance to start reversing the escalating tensions with the United States and Europe, as Russia would have been involved in laying the foundations of a new and more stable security system in Europe.

Putin, rather brutally, declined the offer. The recognition of the Donbas hollows out the Minsk agreement of any meaning, preludes possible further military action against Ukraine and destroys the diplomatic basis for a

negotiation.

Catastrophe looms for Ukraine

In a long and convoluted address to the nation,⁴ filled with historical revisionism and tinted with imperial nostalgia, President Putin has not just recognised the republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. He has de facto withdrawn Russia's recognition of Ukraine as an independent nation.

This, ultimately, is the reason why Putin declined Biden's conditional overture. Ukraine's prospective for NATO membership, while a real concern for Russia, appears in fact to be secondary in Putin's calculus. In 2014, when Russia forcibly annexed Crimea and fomented civil war in the Donbas, Ukraine was by law⁵ a neutral state (things changed after that).⁶ Public opinion was not supportive of NATO's membership either⁷ (again, that changed after 2014). Ukrainians who took to the streets in the winter of 2013–14 did not demand accession to the Atlantic Alliance. They protested against then president Viktor Yanukovich's decision to renege on an

⁴ "Extracts from Putin's Speech on Ukraine", in *Reuters*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/extracts-putins-speech-ukraine-2022-02-21>.

⁵ Ukraine, *Law No. 2411-VI of 1 July 2010: On the Fundamentals of Domestic and Foreign Policy*, <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=31604>.

⁶ "Ukraine Votes to Abandon Neutrality, Set Sights on NATO", in *RFE/RL*, 23 December 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/26758725.html>.

⁷ Center for Insights and Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine, 6-15 November, 2021*, December 2021, <https://www.iri.org/resources/iri-ukraine-poll-shows-support-for-eu-nato-membership-concerns-over-economy-and-vaccines-for-covid-19>.

agreement with the European Union⁸ and accept an alternative deal put forward by Putin.

Greater political-economic integration with the EU was meant to consolidate Ukraine's democratic transition by anchoring its political system in the normative political discourse prevailing in the Union, imbued with fundamental freedoms and political pluralism. An integration with the EU posed no security threat to Russia, but was a challenge to the legitimacy and therefore long-term solidity of the increasingly authoritarian system of power created and presided over by Putin.

In Putin's eyes, Ukraine's emancipation from Russia was not just a historical aberration. It also contained the risk that the liberal-democratic germ could infect the Russian populace too.⁹ It is not by chance that Putin's regime, which during his first two terms in office was very much busy with managing domestic consensus, later increasingly focused on repressing dissent.

It is in this light that the new invasion of Ukraine should be seen. Putin has left no room for negotiations on terms that the United States or Europe can find acceptable.

⁸ "Ukraine Protests after Yanukovich EU Deal Rejection", in *BBC News*, 30 November 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25162563>.

⁹ Fiona Hill, "Mr. Putin and the Art of the Offensive Defense: Observations on the Crisis in Ukraine and Crimea (Part One)", in *Brookings Articles*, 16 March 2014, <http://brookings/2bnntZ0>.

Western historical responsibilities, future political choices

The biggest mistake that the United States and Europe could do now is that of letting historical accounts of the post-Cold War period influence their response to Putin's latest move. There are good reasons to contend that NATO's almost casual enlargement to the former Soviet bloc in the 1990s was short-sighted¹⁰ – to be fair, there are valid arguments for the opposite thesis¹¹ as well –, although Putin himself did not raise the issue until his second term in the late 2000s. Less controversial still is the assessment that the George W. Bush administration took a number of strategically disastrous decisions that severely harmed relations with Russia. These spanned the unprovoked and illegal aggression of Iraq in 2003, the withdrawal from the US–Russian Anti-Ballistic Missiles Treaty in 2001, the deployment of parts of a US-built ballistic missile shield to Poland and the Czech Republic in 2007–8, as well as pushing for Georgia and Ukraine to be given a pledge of NATO membership in 2008.

However, this is stuff for historians, not for today's decisionmakers. It is Putin's choices, not those taken by the Clinton or Bush administrations, that should inform US and European policies now.

¹⁰ Thomas L. Friedman, "This Is Putin's War. But America and NATO Aren't Innocent Bystanders", in *The New York Times*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/opinion/putin-ukraine-nato.html>.

¹¹ White House, *Strengthening NATO and European Security*, 2000, <https://clintonwhitehouse5.archives.gov/WH/EOP/NSC/html/nsc-05.html>.

Putin likely does not see the Donbas, which is already being militarised by Russian “peacekeepers”,¹² as an end point, but rather as a launching pad for further destabilising actions or even a possible full-blown invasion of Ukraine. And there is more. The thirty thousand troops that Russia moved into Belarus for a military exercise are likely to be stationed there permanently.¹³ More could follow. Ultimately, a massive deployment of Russian forces in Belarus radically changes the military balance between Russia and NATO in the Baltic area and beyond.

Defending the Suwalki gap¹⁴ – the border area between Poland and Lithuania wedged in-between Belarus and the heavily militarised Russian enclave of Kaliningrad¹⁵ – will become harder for NATO. The Baltic states would be at severe risk of being cut off from allied territory. The threat from Russian forces grows exponentially with Belarus and Ukraine in the Kremlin’s fold, with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania becoming frontier states. These countries only

host a few thousand NATO troops, good for deterrence but not so much for defence.

Russia is on the brink of recovering the superiority in conventional forces in Eastern Europe that the Soviet Union once held along the East-West fault-line in Central Europe.

The experience with Putin’s foreign policy adventures – in Syria and Libya – shows that the Russian president is capable of adapting his course of action when faced with constraints (in both cases, it was Turkey that forced Putin to adjust). The United States and Europe should fill Putin’s path with hurdles.

US and EU leaders should impose financial sanctions and export restrictions on technologies key to Russia’s economy, ranging from the nuclear, oil and gas industry (although hydrocarbon imports should be allowed to continue) to dual use products. EU and US plans to adopt sanctions¹⁶ and especially Germany’s decision to indefinitely suspend the activation of the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline¹⁷ indicate that leaders on both

¹² Max Seddon, Henry Foy and Demetri Sevastopulo, “Vladimir Putin Orders Troops into Eastern Ukraine after Recognising Breakaway Republics”, in *Financial Times*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/b4bf6296-eb4d-4a26-9d46-e252b92b9837>.

¹³ Luke Harding and Shaun Walker, “Russian Troops Will Remain Indefinitely, Says Belarus, as Fears Rise of Ukraine Invasion”, in *The Guardian*, 20 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/knxm9>.

¹⁴ Pippa Malmgren, “War/Where: The Suwalki Gap (Part 2)”, in *Dr. Pippa’s Pen & Podcast*, 22 January 2022, <https://drpippa.substack.com/p/warwhere-the-suwalki-gap-part-2>.

¹⁵ “Russia Adds Firepower to Kaliningrad Exclave Citing NATO Threat”, in *Reuters*, 7 December 2020, <https://reut.rs/33Q1vbH>.

¹⁶ Aime Williams, Demetri Sevastopulo and Max Seddon, “Joe Biden Imposes Wave of Sanctions on Russia for Ukraine ‘Invasion’”, in *Financial Times*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/8a55b33d-6962-4be5-aa5a-880c692f6323>; Henry Foy, Sam Fleming and Demetri Sevastopulo, “West’s First Wave of Russia Sanctions ‘Just the Beginning’”, in *Financial Times*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/40b149bd-cbaa-418c-90df-00fa861e22f4>.

¹⁷ Max Seddon, Guy Chazan and Henry Foy, “Putin Backs Separatist Claims to Whole Donbas Region of Ukraine”, in *Financial Times*, 22 February 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/09fb49b9-c611-4b19-b1ee->

shores of the Atlantic are willing to take this path.

But they should do more. The EU should start working on a financial facility that would give immediate relief to EU operators that would be hit by the unavoidable counter-sanctions that Russia will adopt, helping households in distress due to skyrocketing energy prices. It is also necessary to bolster NATO defence assets in Central-Eastern Europe, at least until Russian troops will remain in Belarus.

A net loss for everybody

None of the aforementioned measures will help the situation go back to before the crisis. Putin has drawn Europe into a world in which win-win solutions will be an increasingly rare commodity. The economic costs that especially the Europeans would incur in order to contain Russian aggression are not irrelevant. Still, they are worth absorbing for the sake of Europe's security.

Whoever doubts this should look at Putin's record since 2008. The United States and Europeans opted for diplomacy after the attack against Georgia. While cynical, seeking an acceptable modus vivendi with Moscow still made sense at the time. In 2014, US and EU leaders reacted to Russia's attack against Ukraine with a mix of relatively limited sanctions and moderate (and non-permanent) increases in NATO's forces in Poland and the Baltics. They calculated that conflict with Russia over Ukraine could be frozen indefinitely. In

2022, they know this will never happen – Putin has said so himself. If they do not oppose Russia forcefully today, the next crisis might be even bigger.

Diplomacy never runs its course. But as things stand now, the focus of the United States and Europe should be on economic retaliation and NATO deterrence and defence assets. Putin has once again managed to shift the ground from under the feet of the Atlantic Alliance. Yet, this time, Western allies appear readier than in the past to retake the initiative. They should do so forcefully, and only then go back to speaking with Moscow.

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